

JAMES HADLEY CHASE

so what
happens
to me?



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So What Happens to Me?
James Hadley Chase
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The sound of the telephone bell brought me awake. I looked at the bedside clock. The time was 09.05. I threw off the sheet and swung my legs to the floor. Through the thin ceiling I could hear my old man answering the telephone. The call had to be for me. He scarcely ever had calls. I struggled into my dressing gown, and by the time I had reached the landing, he was calling for me.

"Someone wants you Jack," he said. "Poison . . . Bolson . . . I didn't get his name."

I took the stairs in three jumps, aware my old man was looking sadly at me.

"I'm just off" he said. "I wish you'd get up a little earlier. We could have had breakfast together."

"Yeah."

I swept into the tiny, drab living room and grabbed up the receiver.

"This is Jack Crane," I said as I watched my old man walk down the path to his five-year-old Chevy for another stint at the bank.

"Hi! Jack!"

Thirteen months rolled away. I would know that voice anywhere and I stiffened to attention.

"Colonel Olson!"

"That's me. Jack! How are you, you old sonofabitch?"

"I'm fine. How are you sir?"

"Cut the 'sir' crap. We're not in the army now thank God! I've had one hell of a time locating you."

The snap in that voice seemed to me to be missing. Here was the greatest bomber pilot ever with enough decorations to plaster a wall actually telling me he had been trying to locate me! Colonel Bernie Olson! My Vietnam boss! The marvellous guy I had kept in the air come rain, sun and snow while he beat the hell out of the Viets. For three years I had been his chief mechanic before he got a bullet in his groin that fixed him. Our parting was the worst moment in my life. He went home and I was detailed to look after another pilot and what a slob he turned out to be! I had hero worshipped Olson. I had never expected to hear from him again, but here he was, speaking to me after thirteen months.

"Listen, Jack," he was saying, "I'm rushed. Have to get off to Paris. How are you fixed? I can steer you to a job, working with me if you're interested."

"I'll say! Nothing would please me more."

"Okay. It's worth fifteen grand. I'll send you your air ticket and

expenses and we'll talk about it." Just why did this great guy sound so flat? I wondered. "I want you down here. I'm calling from Paradise City: it's around sixty miles from Miami. The job's a toughie, but you can make it. Anyway, unless you have something else lined up . . . what have you to lose?"

"Did you say fifteen thousand dollars Colonel?"

"That's it, but you'll earn it."

"That's fine with me."

"You'll be hearing from me. I've got to rush. See you Jack," and the connection was broken.

Slowly, I replaced the receiver, then stared up at the ceiling, a surge of excitement going through me. I had been discharged from the army now for the past six months. I had come home because there was nowhere else for me to go. I had lived these months in a small time town, spending my army payout on girls, booze and generally fooling around. It hadn't been a happy time for either myself or for my old man who managed the local bank.

I had told him I'd find a job sooner or later and not to worry. He wanted to part with his savings to set me up as a garage owner, but that was the last thing I wanted to do. I wasn't going to be just another small-timer as he was. I wanted Big Time.

This was a nice little town and the girls were willing. I had had lots of fun as well as boredom and I told myself that when my money began to run out I would look for something but not in this town. Now, out of the blue, came Colonel Bernie Olson, the man I admired the most in the world, offering me a job that I paid of fifteen thousand! Had I really heard right? Fifteen thousand! And in the most opulent city on the Florida coast! I slammed my fist into my hand. I was so excited I wanted to stand on my head!

So I waited to hear from Olson. I didn't tell my old man, but he was a wise old guy and he knew something was cooking.

When he came back from the bank for lunch, he regarded me as he cooked two steaks. My mother had died while I was in Vietnam. I knew better than to interfere with his routine. He liked to buy the food on his way back from the bank and cook it while I stood around.

"Something good for you Jack?" he asked as he pushed the steaks around in the pan.

"I don't know yet. Could be. A friend of mine wants me to go down to Paradise City, Florida about a possible job."

"Paradise City?"

"Yeah. . . near Miami."

He served the steaks on plates.

"That's a long way from here."

"Could be further."

We took our plates into the living room and we ate for a while, then he said, "Johnson wants to sell his garage. It could be a great opportunity for you. I would put up the capital."

I looked at him: a lonely old man, desperately trying to hold on to me. It would be more than depressing for him to live in this box of a house on his own, but what kind of life would it be for me? He had had his life. I wanted to have mine.

"It's an idea, dad." I didn't look at him but concentrated on the steak, "but I'll see what this job is first."

He nodded.

'Of course.'

We left it like that. He went off to the bank for the afternoon stint and I lay on my bed, thinking. Fifteen thousand dollars!

Maybe it was a toughie, but no job could be too tough that paid that kind of money.

As I lay there. I thought back on the past. I was now twenty-nine years of age. I was a qualified aero-engineer. There was nothing I didn't know about the guts of an aircraft. I had had a good paying job with Lockheed until I got drafted into the Army.

I had spent three years keeping Colonel Olson in the air and now back in this small time town. I knew sooner or later I would have to pick up my career. The trouble with me, I told myself, was that the Army had spoilt me. I was reluctant to begin life again where I had to think for myself and to compete. The Army had suited me fine. The money was good, the girls were willing and I went along with the discipline. But fifteen grand a year sounded like the rise of the curtain to the way I hoped to live.

A toughie? Well. I told myself as I reached for a cigarette, it would have to be damned tough before I quit on that kind of money.

Two days dragged by, then I got a bulky envelope from Olson. It arrived as my old man was taking of for the bank. He came up to my room, tapped on the door and came in. I had just come awake and I felt like hell. I had had a really thick night.

I had taken Suzy Dawson to the Taverna nightclub and we had got stinking drunk. Later we had rolled around on a piece of waste ground until 03.00, then somehow I had got her home and somehow I had got myself home and into bed.

I blinked at my old man, feeling my head expanding and contracting. I was getting double vision that told me how stinking I had been. He looked very tall, very thin and very tired, but what really killed me was there were two of him.

"Hi, Dad!" I said and forced myself to sit up.

"Here's a letter for you Jack," he said. "I hope it's what you want. I have to get off. See you lunchtime."

I took the bulky envelope.

"Thanks. . . have a good morning." That was the least I could say.

"The usual."

I lay still until I heard the front door close, then I ripped open the envelope. It contained a first class ticket to Paradise City, five hundred dollars in cash and a brief note that ran: I'll meet your plane Bernie.

I looked at the money. I checked the air ticket. Fifteen thousand dollars a year' In spite of my aching head and feeling drained empty, I punched the air and yelled Yippee!

As I came through the banner that led into the opulent lobby of Paradise City's airport. I spotted him before he spotted me.

That tall, lean figure was unmistakable, but there were changes.

Then he saw me and his lean face lit up with a smile. It wasn't that wide, friendly grin he kept especially for me out in Vietnam. It was a cynical smile of a man full of disillusion, but anyway a smile.

"Hi! Jack!"

We shook hands. His hand was hot and sweaty: so sweaty I surreptitiously wiped my hand on the seat of my pants.

"Hi! Colonel! It's been a long time. . ."

"Sure has." He regarded me. "Cut out the Colonel, Jack. Call me Bernie. You look fine."

"And you too."

His grey eyes moved over me.

"That's good news. Well, come on. Let's get out of here."

We crossed the crowded lobby into the hot sunshine. As we walked I looked him over. He was wearing a dark blue blouse shirt, white linen slacks and expensive looking sandals. He made my seersucker brown suit and scuffed shoes shabby.

In the shade stood a white E-type Jag. He slid under the driving wheel and I got in beside him, shoving my bag at the back.

"Some car."

"Yeah. It's all right." He shot me a quick look. "It's not mine. It belongs to the boss."

He drove onto the highway. The time was 10.00 and the traffic was light.

"What have you been doing since you got out?" he asked as he steered the car past a truck loaded with crates of oranges.

"Nothing. Just getting the feel of being out. I'm shackled up with my old man. I've been spending Army money. It's running low now. You caught me at the right moment. Next week I was going to write to Lockheed to see if they could find a place for me."

"You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"I guess not, but I have to eat."

Olson nodded.

"That's right . . . don't we all."

"You look as if you eat and then some."

"Yeah."

He swung the Jag of the highway and onto a dirt road that led down to the sea. A hundred yards or so down the road we came to a wooden built cafe-bar with a veranda that looked out onto the expanse of beach and beyond the sea. He pulled up.

"We can talk here Jack," he said and got out.

I followed him up the creaky steps and onto the veranda.

The place was empty. We sat down at a table and a girl came out and smiled at us.

"What'll you have?" Olson asked.

"A coke," I said although I wanted whisky.

"Two cokes."

The girl went away.

"You quit drinking Jack?" Olson asked. "I remember you were hitting the hard stuff pretty often."

"I start after six."

"Sound idea. I don't touch the stuff now."

He produced a pack of cigarettes and we lit up. The girl came with the cokes, then went away.

"I haven't a lot of time Jack, so let me give you the photo,"

Olson said. "I have a job for you. . . if you want it."

"You said fifteen grand. I'm still getting over the shock." I grinned at him. "Anyone but you who offered me that kind of money, I would have thought crazy, but coming from you. Colonel, I'm sort of excited."

He sipped his coke and stared out across the beach.

"I'm working for Lane Essex," he said and paused.

I stared at him, startled. There could be few people who hadn't heard of Lane Essex. He was one of those colourful men like Playboy's Hefner, although a lot richer than Hefner. Essex ran nightclubs, owned hotels in every major city in the world, ran Casinos, built blocks of apartments, owned a couple of oil fields, had a big stake in the Detroit car world and was reputed to be worth two billion dollars.

"That's something!" I exclaimed. "Lane Essex! You mean you're offering me a job to work for him?"

"That's the idea Jack, if you want it."

"Want it? This is terrific! Lane Essex!"

"Sounds fine, doesn't it? But I told you. . . it's a toughie. Look, Jack, working for Essex is like getting tangled with a buzz saw." He stared at me. "I'm thirty-five and I have grey hair. Why? Because I work for Lane Essex."

I looked directly at him and I remembered him thirteen months ago.

He had aged ten years. That snap in his voice had gone. There was a shifty, worried expression in his eyes. His hands were never still. He fiddled with his glass. He kept flicking at his cigarette. He kept running his fingers through his greying hair. This wasn't Colonel Bernie Olson I used to know.

"Is it that tough?"

"Essex has a saying," Olson said quietly. "He says nothing in this world is impossible. He called a meeting a couple of months ago and had all his staff gathered together in some goddamn hall. He delivered a pep talk. The theme was that if you wanted to remain with him you had to accept the impossible as possible. He has a staff of over eight hundred men and women: that's his personal staff: people working in Paradise City: executives, P.R.O's. lawyers, accountants, right down to people like myself. He told us if we couldn't accept this requirement that nothing on this earth is impossible, then to see Jackson, his second-in-command, and check out. Not one of the eight hundred dummies, including myself, saw Jackson. So now we're stuck with this slogan that nothing is impossible." He flicked away the butt of his cigarette and lit another. "Now I come to you Jack. Essex has ordered a new plane: a four-jet job I'm going to fly. It's a very special job with accommodation for a big conference, ten sleeping cabins, all the works: bar, restaurant and so on and so on, plus Essex's suite with a circular bed. This job will be delivered in three months' time, but Essex's runway which takes the kite I'm flying now isn't long enough to take the new kite. I have the job of lengthening the runway. While I'm doing this, I also have to fly him all over the goddamn world. It just can't be done, but nothing is impossible." He drank some of his coke.

"So I thought of you I'm putting the cards face up on the table Jack. I get paid forty-five thousand a year. I want you to take care of the runway and see for certain it is ready within three months from today. We get delivery of the new kite on November 1st and I expect to fly her in. I'm offering you fifteen thousand out of my pay. I tried to talk to Essex, but he wouldn't play.

"It's your job, Olson," he said. "How you do it doesn't interest me but do it!" I knew better than to ask him for extra help. He doesn't go along with that sort of talk. You don't have to worry about expenses. I've got the operation started, but I want you to be there to see it keeps moving."

"What's the additional length of the runway?"

"A half a mile will do it."

"What's the ground like?"

"Pretty hellish. There's a forest, slopes and even rocks."

"I'd like to take a look at it."

"I expected you to say that"

We regarded each other. This wasn't the exciting job I had been hoping for. Some instinct told me that there was something odd about it.

"At the end of three months, providing I get the runway built, what happens to me?"

"A good question." He fiddled with his glass and stared out across the beach. "I'll have a talking point with Essex. He'll be pleased. I can talk him into giving you the job as airport supervisor and you'll earn at least thirty thousand."

I finished my coke while I thought.

"Suppose Essex isn't pleased . . . then how do I stand?"

"You mean if you don't complete the job in three months?"

"That's what I mean."

Olson lit another cigarette. I noticed his hands were unsteady.

"Then I guess you and I are washed up. I told him it could be done. If you don't fix it, then we both are out." He dragged smoke into his lungs. "I was lucky to get this job Jack. Top class pilots are a dime a dozen these days. Essex has only to snap his fingers to have a load of them in his lap."

"You talked about fifteen thousand a year What it really comes down to is you will pay me \$3750 for three months' work and then it depends on how pleased Essex will be whether I get on the permanent staff—right?"

Olson stared at the tip of his cigarette.

"That's about it." He looked at me, then away. "After all Jack, as you have nothing to do right now it isn't so bad is it?"

"No, it isn't bad."

We sat in silence for a long moment, then he said. "Let's go over to the airfield. You take a look and tell me what you think. I have to take him to New York in three hours so I haven't a lot of time."

"I'd like some money paid into my bank before I start work, Bernie," I said. "I'm short."

"No problem, I'll fix that." He got to his feet. "Let's look at it."

There's something wrong about this setup, I told myself as he drove back onto the highway. But what can I lose? \$3750 for a three months stint wasn't bad money. If it didn't finally jell, I still had Lockheed to fall back on. All the same my mind was uneasy. This man at my side wasn't the great Colonel Olson I used to know. That man I would have trusted with my last cent. I would have given my life for him, but not this man.

There was an odd change in him that bothered me. I couldn't put my finger on what the change was, but I felt wary of him and that's a bad thing.

The Lane Essex airport was located about ten miles behind the City. Above the big-wired entrance gates was a sign that read: ESSEX ENTERPRISES.

The two guards in bottle green uniforms with revolvers on their hips, saluted Olson as he drove in.

The usual airport buildings looked bright, new and modern.

I could see people moving around in the control tower. They also wore this bottle green uniform.

Olson drove onto the runway, sending the jag surging forward. About half a mile down the runway, I saw a big cloud of dust and Olson slowed.

"Here we are," he said and pulled up. "Look, Jack, let me put you further in the photo. I've organised everything as I told you. Your job is to see that it is kept organised. I'm scared of labour trouble. We have a gang of around sixteen hundred men: most of them coloured. They sleep in tents and they are supposed to work from 07.00 to 18.00 with a two-hour break for lunch. Make no mistake about this: It's goddamn hot in the afternoon. The man in charge is Tim O'Brien. You'll be his boss. I've told him you're coming. He's okay, but I don't trust the Irish over much. Your job is to supervise him while he supervises the gang. Keep clear of them. I don't want trouble. They like O'Brien. Do you get all this?"

I stared at him.

"So what the hell do I do?"

"Like I said. Watch O'Brien. Move around the site. If you spot anyone lying down on the job, tell O'Brien. Make certain no one knocks off until 18.00."

He got out of the car and walked fast towards the cloud of dust. Bewildered, I followed him. When we had got beyond the cloud of dust, I saw the work going on and it shook me. There seemed to be around twenty bulldozers levelling the ground. An army of men sweated with shovels, heaving rocks, cutting up fallen trees with electric saws. There was a road-making machine and the stink of tar was strong.

From somewhere a short, fat man wearing baggy, dirty khaki trousers and a sweat-stained shirt appeared before us.

"Hi! Colonel," he said.

"How's it going, Tim?" Olson asked.

The man grinned.

"Like a dream. The boys have cut down thirty firs this morning. We're just clearing them."

Olson turned to me.

"Jack . . . meet Tim O'Brien. You two are going to work together. Tim . . . this is Jack Crane."

While he was speaking, I was looking at O'Brien. He was a hunk of bone, fat and muscle, around forty-five years of age, balding, with a blunt featured face, steady blue eyes. This was a man no one could dislike: a worker, that you could trust and I thrust out my hand which he gripped in an easy manner.

A violent, too close explosion went off with a bang that made me jump.

O'Brien grinned.

"We're blasting," he said. "Got a lot of rock down there."

Olson tapped my arm.

"I've got to move Jack. I'll be seeing you in three days' time. Tim will look after you."

He turned and started back to where he had left the jag.

O'Brien looked at his watch

"Give me ten minutes, Mr. Crane and we'll go back to the airport. I just want to see the boys get their lunch," and he walked off leaving me standing there like a goddamn dummy.

I watched. The operation of clearing the land was going like clockwork. Already the road-building machine had completed two hundred yards of runway. There was another bang as more explosives tore into the rocks ahead and ten bulldozers roared into action. What the hell am I doing here? I asked myself. This couldn't be better organised. At the rate these men were working the runway would be completed in two months let alone three.

I stood waiting in the hot sunshine until someone blew a whistle. The machines cut and the noise died down. Men dropped their shovels and there was a general movement towards three big trucks where Negroes started to hand out drinks and food containers.

O'Brien drove up to me in an open jeep.

"Hop in, Mr. Crane," he said. "I'll take you to your cabin. You could do with a shower. I know I could!" He grinned. "Then suppose you and me have a snack together in my cabin. It's right next door."

"Fine." I got in beside him. "Look, Tim, suppose you call me Jack?"

He glanced at me, then nodded.

"Why not?"

He drove fast down the runway, sheered off and headed towards a long row of cabins that stood near the control tower.

He pulled up outside the row, got out and walked over to cabin 5.

"This is yours. Make yourself at home. Suppose you come to cabin 6 in half an hour? Okay?"

"Fine with me."

Carrying my bag, I opened the cabin door and walked into a blessed air-conditioned atmosphere. I shut the door and looked around. Everything in the big living room was luxe. Four lounging chairs, a

fully stocked refrigerated cocktail cabinet, a colour T.V., a bookshelf stuffed with books, a fitted carpet that felt like I was walking on grass and a stereo and radio set against the far wall. Beyond the living room was a small bedroom with a double bed, closets, night table with a lamp and beyond that a bathroom with all the equipment you could wish for.

I stripped of, took a shower, shaved, put on a short-sleeved shirt and a pair of linen slacks, then returned to the living room.

I was tempted to have a drink, but decided against it. Checking my watch, I had five minutes to wait, so I lit a cigarette and waited. At 12.30 I went to cabin 6 and tapped.

O'Brien looking a lot less sweaty but still in the same clothes opened the door and waved me in. I entered a facsimile of the cabin I had just left. There was a smell of onions frying that made my mouth water.

"Lunch is just about ready," he said. "What'll you drink?"

"Nothing, thanks." I sat down in one of the lounging chairs.

A girl wearing a bottle green blouse and tight bottle green pants came in with a tray. Quickly she set the table, put down two plates, then left.

"Let's eat," O'Brien said and sat at the table.

I joined him.

My plate contained a thick steak, lima beans and french fried potatoes.

"You eat well here," I said as I cut into the steak.

"Everything is top class here." O'Brien said. "We're working for Essex."

We ate for a minute or so, then O'Brien said, "I understand you and Olson were buddies in Vietnam."

"He was my boss. I kept him in the air."

"How did you like it in Vietnam?"

I cut another piece of steak, put mustard on it and stared at it.

"It was fine with me but then I wasn't getting shot at." I conveyed the steak into my mouth and chewed.

"Makes a difference."

"You can say that again."

We ate for some moments, then O'Brien said. "You have had a lot of experience in laying runways?"

I paused in eating and looked directly at him. He was looking directly at me. We stared at each other and I just couldn't help liking this heavy, fat man as he chewed his steak, his frank blue eyes looking into mine.

"I'm an aero-engineer," I said. "I know the guts of most kites, but I have no idea how to build a runway."

He gave a little nod, then plastered a piece of his steak with

mustard.

“Yeah. Well, Jack, thanks for being frank. Let’s take it from here. Olson told me he wanted me supervised. He’s scared the runway won’t be completed in three months. He said he was getting an expert to watch me. I go along with him because the money is fine. He’s scared silly of Essex. When a man is scared of another man because he’s worried about keeping his job, then I’m sorry for him and am willing to play along.”

I hesitated, then said, “I knew him thirteen months ago. This is the first time I’ve seen him since then. There’s been a hell of a change.”

“Is that right? I’ve only been on the job for a couple of weeks, but I know a scared man when I see him.” O’Brien finished his meal, then sat back. “Well, Jack, what do you suggest you do?” I can assure you the runway will be completed within the next six weeks. I’ve a fine gang working with me and I know I can rely on them.”

“Olson said something about labour trouble.”

O’Brien shook his head.

“Not a chance. Everyone’s well paid and I know how to handle them.”

I shrugged.

“Then I’m damned if I know what I’m going to do. As soon as I saw your setup I knew there was nothing in it for me. You know, Tim there’s something, goofy about this. Olson is paying me good money out of his own pocket for what seems to be for nothing.”

O’Brien smiled.

“Well, if you’re getting paid and it’ll make you happy, you’d better supervise me, hadn’t you?”

“Can I come with you and take a look around?” I felt awkward.

“Of course.” He looked at his watch. “Time I got moving anyway.”

He drove me back to the site and slid out of the jeep.

“You take her Jack. I won’t need her this afternoon. Take a look around. I’m open to any suggestions.”

Feeling stupid, I drove by the men who had already begun working, got beyond the level ground and down into the forest.

There I left the jeep and walked.

Fifty or so Negroes were felling trees with electric saws. They glanced indifferently at me, then one of them, a big, good-looking buck waved me away.

“Ain’t safe to wander around, brother,” he said. “Trees are falling like rain.”

I moved away and leaving the forest, I walked into the hot sun to where they were blasting. Again I was told to keep away.

As O’Brien had said, the work was going ahead at a fast clip.

He had enough machines, enough men and enough explosives to

make the runway in six weeks.

I turned down a sloping path that led to a running stream, well away from the site and I sat on a rock, lit a cigarette and did some thinking.

One thing I was now certain of: there was nothing here for me to do with O'Brien in charge. So why had Olson sent for me? Why was he paying me \$3750 out of his own pocket just to stooge around when he must know that O'Brien would deliver? What was behind this business? He had gone now to New York. He had said he would be back in three days. In the meantime what was I going to do? My first inclination was to go back home, leaving a letter for him, saying I couldn't see how I could be of help, but I quickly killed that idea. I didn't want to go back to that little drab house: back into small time again.

I decided I would wait here until Olson returned and then have it out with him. In the meantime, I decided to write a report on the progress of the runway just to show him that I had been trying to earn his money.

I returned to the site and found O'Brien working on a stalled bulldozer. When he saw me, he came over.

"Look, Tim," I said. I had to shout to get above the noise of the other bulldozers, "it looks fine to me. Of course the runway will be finished in six weeks. At the rate you're going it could be finished in five."

He nodded.

"But I've got to do something to earn my money. I need it. Could I look at your records so I can get out some kind of report for Olson"? Would you mind that?"

"Sure, Jack. That's no problem. Go to my cabin. In the top left-hand drawer of my desk, you'll find everything you want. I won't come back with you. I have this machine to fix."

"I appreciate that" I paused, then went on. "My report will probably lose me my job, but that's my luck. I'm going to say there's nothing I can do better than what you're doing right now."

He regarded me, smiled, then lightly punched me on my arm.

"You've said it. I've been constructing runways now for the past twenty years. See you tonight," and leaving me, he returned to the stalled bulldozer.

I got in the jeep and drove back to the cabins. I was sweating. The afternoon sun was fierce and it was a relief to walk into O'Brien's air-conditioned cabin. I paused in the doorway, startled.

A blonde girl was lolling in one of the lounging chairs. She was wearing red stretch pants and a white blouse that was open to her navel, just containing her heavy breasts. Her hair fell to her shoulders

in a cascade of gold silk. She was around twenty-five years of age with a narrow, high cheek boned face with large green eyes. She was about the sexiest looking woman I had seen for more years than I cared to remember.

She regarded me coolly and then smiled. Her teeth were as white as orange pith and her lips glistening and sensual.

"Hi!" she said. "Looking for Tim?"

I moved into the room and closed the door.

"He's out on the site."

"Oh!" She made a little face, then stirred her lush body. "I was hoping to catch him. How that man works!"

"I guess that's right."

All right, I admit it, she turned me on. The girls in my small time town had nothing on her.

"Who are you?" she asked, smiling.

"Jack Crane. I'm the new runway supervisor. Who are you?"

"Pam Osborn. I'm deputy air hostess when Jean wants time off."

We regarded each other

"Well, that's fine." I went over to the desk and sat down.

"Anything I can do for you Miss Osborn?"

"Maybe . . . it's a lonely life sticking around this airport."

She shifted a little in her chair. One of her heavy breasts nearly escaped but she pushed it back in time. "I looked in to chat up Tim."

That I didn't believe. I was sure at this hour—it was just after 16.00, she would know O'Brien would be on the site.

Again I felt wary. I was sure she had been waiting for me.

Why?

"You have no luck." I opened the top left-hand drawer of the desk. There was a heavy black leather folder there. I took it out. "I too have work to do."

She laughed.

"The brush-off Jack?"

"Well. . ."

We looked at each other.

"Well. . . what?"

I hesitated, but she had me going now.

"My cabin's next door," I said.

"So shall we go next door?"

Again I hesitated, but women like her do things to me. I put the folder back in the drawer

"Why not?"

She slid out of the chair as I came around the desk.

"There's something about you . . ."

"I know, and there's something about you too."

I slid my arms around her as she slammed her body against mine. Her lips crushed mine and her tongue darted into my mouth.

All caution, all wariness went from my mind. I practically dragged her out of O'Brien's cabin and into mine.

"You're some man," she said lazily.

The loving, if you can call it that, was over and she lay like a beautiful, sleek cat on the big bed beside me.

She had been the best lay I had had since the little Vietnamese way back in Saigon who had been a little more violent, a little more intense, but not much.

I reached for a cigarette, lit it and stretched. My mind became wary again.

"Sort of sudden, wasn't it?" I said, not looking at her.

She laughed.

"I suppose. I heard you had arrived. I hoped you would want a little loving. I guessed you would come to Tim's cabin or your own. I'm a girl who needs it and Man, are there creeps on this camp: creeps who are scared of their own shadows. They would no more screw than cut their throats: that's how scared they are of losing their jobs."

"So that talk about waiting to chat up Tim was so much crap?"

"What do you think? Can you imagine a girl like me taking on a sweaty, husky like Tim? I've nothing against him. He's okay, but not my type." She raised her arms above her head and released a contented sigh. "I was hoping to find new blood. . .I've found it."

I half turned and looked at her. She was a beautiful, lush, hard piece of corruption, but she fascinated me.

"Does Olson get it from you?"

"Bernie?" She shook her head and her face darkened a little. "Don't you know what happened to him? He got a bullet where it does the most damage. Poor Bernie is no longer operative."

This shocked me. I knew Olson had been hit in the groin while completing his last mission, but I hadn't thought just what that could mean. Was that Olson's trouble, apart from being scared he would lose his job? Judas! I thought, if that had happened to me!

"I didn't know."

"He's a marvellous man," Pam said. "He talked to me about you. He thinks you're marvellous too. He's a big admirer of yours."

"Is that right?"

"He needs you Jack. He's lonely. He doesn't get along with these other creeps. He kept asking me if I thought you would take this job. He was scared you would turn him down."

Okay, it was well done, but there was a ring about it that warned me she had been rehearsed.

"I wouldn't turn Bernie down no matter what the job was."

She raised one leg and regarded it.

"Well, you're here . . . that proves it, doesn't it?" She lowered her leg and smiled at me.

"But how long do I stay? There's no job here for me baby. Tim is taking care of the runway."

"Bernie wants you to watch him."

"I know. He told me. Tim doesn't need watching." I crushed out my cigarette. "What else did he tell you?"

She gave me that blank look women give when they are not talking.

"Just he wanted you with him: that's all."

"You sound as if you have his confidence."

"You could say that. There are times when there is no flying. Essex isn't always in the air. Bernie and I get together. He doesn't like Jean. He's lonely."

"You don't mean he's offering to pay me out of his own pocket because he wants my company?"

"That's about it Jack. I hope you'll go along with him."

"I think I'd better talk to him."

"You do that."

"He seems scared of losing his job."

"Everyone is. Essex is hard to get along with and so is Mrs. Essex."

"Is there a Mrs. Essex?"

Pam wrinkled her nose.

"You're lucky Bernie is employing you. Yes there is a Mrs. Essex . . . dear Victoria. I hope you never run into her. She's a blueprint for the biggest bitch in the world. Everyone is terrified of her."

"Like that?"

"Yes. You put a foot wrong just once and Mrs. Essex gets you the gate. She has her husband in the palm of her hand. Okay, Essex is a bastard, full of conceit, but then he has something to be conceited about. But Victoria! She's a jumped up nothing: just a beautiful face and body: a spoilt pampered bitch who plays hell with anyone who depends on Essex for a living."

"She sounds nice."

"That's the word." Pam laughed. "Keep clear of her. What are you doing tonight? Like to take me out to dinner? I have a Mini Austin. We could go to a seafood restaurant in the City. Fancy it?"

"Fine." I said. "Now move this beautiful body out of here."

I have work to do."

"Not on your first day Jack. That's always fatal," and she twined her arms around me.

L'Espadon Restaurant, a straight steal from the Paris Ritz's decor, was built out on a pier. Four plaster, painted swordfish plus some fishnets decorated the walls. The tables, lit by electric candles were set wide enough for people to talk secrets and not be overheard.

Pam was wearing one of those long things, down to her heels, caught at the waist with a silver belt with a snake's head.

She looked pretty gorgeous. The Maître d'hôtel came sliding over to her, giving her his teeth with that wide, friendly smile that Maître d's reserve only for their favourites. She said something to him I didn't catch and with a wave of his hand he conducted us to a table at the far end of the restaurant with lush, plush seats for two and a view of the whole restaurant.

"A pleasure Miss Osborn," he said as he drew out her chair. "A champagne cocktail?" He didn't even look at me.

She sat down and smiled at him.

"That would be lovely, Henri."

"May I arrange what you eat?" He was leaning over her and I could smell his after-shave.

"Let's have the menu," I said, "and a Scotch on the rocks for me."

Slowly his head came around and he regarded me. His eyes moved over my slightly worn lightweight suit and a pained look came into his eyes. His expression told me as nothing else could that I was Mr. Nobody.

"Let's leave it to Henri," Pam said firmly. "He knows."

I was tempted to start something but the opulence of this place and the hostile expression in this fat man's eyes intimidated me. I gave up.

"Sure . . . let's leave it to Henri."

There was a pause, then Henri drifted away to receive a party of six.

"You screw him too?" I asked.

She giggled.

"Just once. It's made a lasting impression. This is the only restaurant in this City where I eat free . . . and that includes you."

I relaxed. From the look of the place I was sure I wouldn't have had enough money to settle the check. I regarded her not without admiration.

"You get around, baby."

"You can say that again." Leaning forward, resting her cool hand on mine, she went on, "Henri is terrified of me. He has a jealous wife and he imagines I'm going to blackmail him."

"Nice for you."

The drinks arrived. There were little hot hors d'oeuvres to keep them company. Two waiters hovered over us. The restaurant was filling up.

"Some place." I looked around. "This must cost plenty without Henri picking up the tab."

"Oh it does."

The wine waiter arrived with a bottle of Sancerre in an ice bucket. He bowed to Pam who gave him a sexy smile. I wondered if she were screwing him too.

Then a sole in shrimp sauce with slices of thick lobster meat arrived.

"You've certainly caught the knack of living," I said as I forked fish into my mouth.

"Men!" Pam shook her head: her large green eyes wide with wonderment. "What they will do for a girl like me. The trick, of course, is to give a little and take a lot. Men are either grateful or they get scared, but it still pays off."

"What am I supposed to be: grateful or scared?"

She chased a piece of lobster with her fork as she said, "Just be your exciting self."

"I'll remember that"

She shot me a quick glance.

"It's gorgeous, isn't it?"

"Sure is." We ate in silence for a moment or so, then I said, "Bernie won't be back for a couple of days?"

"Look, Jack, let's forget Bernie. Let's enjoy ourselves. Right?"

But I was uneasy. Before leaving the airport, I had had a word with Tim. Pam had said she would pick me up at 20.00 so I had had time for a shave, a shower and a drink. Tim had returned to big cabin at 19.25. He had looked in.

"Got what you want?" he asked. He looked dead tired, sweaty and dirty.

I felt a twinge of conscience.

"I had a visitor. She didn't leave me any time."

"You mean Pam?"

"That's who I mean."

He grinned.

"That girl! I knew she would make for you, but not this fast."

"I'm going out with her tonight."

Tim eyed the drink in my hand.

"I could use one of those."

"Come on in: she's certain to be late."

I mixed him a long Scotch and soda with plenty of ice.

"What is she?" I asked as I handed him the glass. "The local

hooker?"

"She's Olson's girlfriend."

That shook me.

"You know Bernie. . .?"

"Oh sure. He doesn't care about her sleeping around. They have a thing for each other. The only thing they don't do is go to bed together."

"For Pete's sake! If I'd known I wouldn't have touched her! I'm not going out with her tonight if she's Bernie's girl."

Tim drank greedily, paused to wipe his mouth with the back of his band.

"If you don't, some other guy will. Just don't think it's anything but a lay Jack. She's Bernie's girl. She has to have it. Olson can't give it to her, so he lets her play around. This is no secret: the staff here and I guess half Paradise City knows about it, but just don't take her seriously." He finished his drink, set down his glass and moved to the door. "Me for a shower and T.V." He regarded me, then smiled. "Life's damn odd, isn't it."

But I now had Bernie on my conscience.

"Look, Pam," I said, then paused while the waiter took our plates away. "Tim tells me you're Bernie's girl. He's my best friend. This bothers me."

"Oh, for God's sake! I told you: I need it! Bernie doesn't mind. Will you stop talking about it. I tell you: Bernie knows how I am. He doesn't mind."

The waiter brought a Tournedo Rossini with fronds d'artichauts and princess potatoes. He served while I thought.

"Looks marvellous, doesn't it?" Pam said. "Mmmm! I adore eating here!"

"He must mind," I said. "You mean he's in love with you and you with him?"

"Oh, shut up!" Her voice was low and suddenly vicious. "Take what you get and be thankful!"

I gave up. I told myself from now on, I wouldn't touch her. This was a hell of a situation! Bernie . . . the man I admired most and I had screwed his girl!

I lost my appetite. As good as the steak was, I now found it hard to eat. I looked around the restaurant while I played with the food on my plate. There was a sudden commotion with Henri flying down the aisle to the entrance. I saw a tall, massively built man, around sixty years of age, come out of the shadows and into the defused light. I

have never seen such a man. By the way he walked he was obviously a queer. His fat face with its snout of a nose made me think of a disagreeable dolphin. He wore an outrageous orange wig that rested a little sideways on what was obviously a completely baldhead. He had on a buttercup yellow linen suit and a frilled, purple shirt.

As a show-off he was in a class of his own.

“Look at that freak,” I said, glad to change the conversation. “Who can he be?”

Pam glanced down the aisle.

“That’s Claude Kendrick. He owns the most fashionable, the most expensive and the most profitable art gallery here.”

I watched the fat man waddle to a table, three tables from where we were sitting. Behind him came a thin, willowy man who could be any age from twenty-five to forty. His long thick hair was the colour of sable and his lean face, narrow eyes and almost lipless mouth made him look like a suspicious, vicious rat.

“That’s Louis de Mamey who runs the gallery,” Pam told me. She cut into her steak and ate.

The fuss Henri was making of these two told me that Henri considered them V.I.P. people. Interested, I watched them settle at their table. A Vodka martini appeared as if by magic and was placed before the fat man. His companion refused a drink.

There was a brief discussion with Henri about what they would eat, then Henri, darting away, snapped his fingers at a waiter to follow him.

Claude Kendrick looked around, like a king surveying his court. He wagged his fingers at people he appeared to know, then he looked our way. His little eyes dwelt on my face for a brief moment, then they shifted to Pam. His eyebrows crawled upwards and his mouth pursed into a smile. Then he did the damndest thing. He bowed to her and using the orange wig as you might use a hat, he lifted it high of his egg baldhead, bowed again and replaced it then he shifted a little in his chair and began to talk to his companion.

Pam giggled.

“He’s marvellous, isn’t he?” she said. “He does that to all his women friends.”

“You a friend of his?”

“I used to model some of his special jewelry. I’ve known him for some years.” She finished her steak. “Excuse me . . . I have an idea,” and getting up, she went over to Kendrick’s table.

Her back screened him from me and she talked to him for about three minutes, then returned to our table.

“What was all that about?” I asked.

“He has the most marvellous motor cruiser. I thought it would be

fun if we had a trip. He's delighted. You know this city is a bit dull for people who always live here. Everyone likes to meet someone new. You'll come, won't you?"

As I hesitated, she went on, "He's really fun and very important." The waiter came and cleared our plates. "You'll like him."

The motor cruiser had an appeal.

"Well, okay: what have I to lose?"

I looked across at Kendrick. He smiled and nodded to me as the waiter served him smoked salmon. I nodded back to him.

We finished the meal with coffee. Kendrick and de Mamey only had the salmon and also coffee. By the time we were ready to go, they were also ready to go.

Pam pushed back her chair and led me to their table.

"Claude. . . this is Jack Crane. He's working on the runway Jack. . . this is Mr. Kendrick."

"Call me Claude, cheri." A hand that felt like a lump of warm dough engulfed mine. "So glad. Welcome to this lovely city. I do hope you will be marvellously happy here." He heaved himself to his feet. "Let's go out into the moonlight. Louis, my pet, do take care of darling Pam. I want to get to know Jack." He encircled my arm and led me down the aisle. Twice he paused to raise his awful wig and bow to women who smiled at him. I was sweating with embarrassment by the time Henri bowed us into the hot night air.

Here we all paused.

Kendrick said. "Do take Pam for a little ride in the boat Louis. You know how she loves it. Jack, will you put up with me for a few minutes? There is something I want to talk about."

Before I could protest, Pam and Louis were walking away.

"What's there to talk about?" I hated this fat freak and hated the idea of being stranded with him.

"It's about Bernie; he is one of my bestest friends." Kendrick mopped his face with a silk handkerchief. "Let us get in my car. It's air-conditioned. I find this heat a little oppressive, don't you?"

I hesitated, but without Pam to drive me back to the airport, I was marooned so I followed him down the pier to where a gaudy yellow and black Cadillac stood waiting. A Jap chauffeur slid out and had the doors open as we approached.

"Just drive around, Yuko," Kendrick said and lowered his bulk into the car. I went around the other side and got in. There was a glass partition between the chauffeur and the rear seats.

It was wonderfully cool when the car doors were shut. The car slid away and Kendrick offered me a cigar which I refused.

We drove along the sea front for some minutes, then the chauffeur turned off the main boulevard and took us out into the country.

Kendrick who had got his cigar smoking evenly, said, "I understand that you are a very close friend of Bernie."

"That is correct."

"I am worried about Bernie." Kendrick heaved a sigh. "The poor darling. . . that dreadful wound."

I didn't say anything but waited.

"He has terrible people to work for. That man Essex! What a creature! And his wife!"

Still I didn't say anything.

"Bernie feels so insecure."

"Don't we all!" I said, watching the moon as it floated like a yellow disc in the cloudless sky.

"You feel the same?" He turned to look directly at me. "You also feel insecure?"

"Who doesn't?"

"You're right, of course, but have you ambitions? Do you want to be rich? I'm sure you do and Bernie is the same. We often talk about money. He once said to me . . . I remember his exact words: 'Claude, I would do anything to fix this insecurity. If I could only lay my hands on some real money I wouldn't care how I got it.'"

"Bernie said that?"

"Those were his exact words."

It was my turn to look directly at him.

"Look, Kendrick, suppose you skip this phoney buildup? To me, it stinks. I can see you want to feel your way as you don't know much about me, but your approach is as subtle as a bulldozer. What have you on your mind?"

He took off his orange wig and looked inside as if he expected to find something hiding in there, then he slapped it back on his head.

"Bernie warned me," he said and smiled. "He said I would have to be careful how I handled you. He told me he once had got you out of trouble. You held up a Vietnamese moneychanger and got away with three thousand dollars. Bernie gave you an alibi. Is that correct?"

"Vietnamese money changers were easy meat. I needed the money and he had plenty. Bernie talks too much."

"Bernie said the money changer was killed by a bomb so everything was nicely tidied up."

As the Caddy drifted along with the lights of Paradise City making a necklace of diamonds in the distance, my mind went back to Saigon.

My Vietnamese girl wanted money to get to Hong Kong.

She was half out of her mind with terror. She had come from the North and she was sure the Viets were after her. Nothing I could tell her made an impact. She insisted she had to have money to bribe her way to safety. I was a bit crazy about her but her stupid terror spoilt

our nights. I had no money to give her. Although I knew I was losing her, I finally decided I would have to get her to Hong Kong. One evening I walked into this moneychanger's office, with a service revolver in my hand and forced him to give me the money. I had been drinking hard and didn't give a damn. I gave the money to her and that was the last I saw of her. Then the M.P.s had a line-up and the moneychanger fingered me. I thought I was in the ditch, but Olson arrived. He said he and I were working on his kite at the time of the hold-up. I'm sure the M.P.s weren't convinced, but Bernie had a lot of authority and I got away with it.

Thinking about this incident, it seemed a long way in the past. It was a lucky thing for me that the moneychanger's office, with him in it, caught one of the first rocket bombs the Viets threw at Saigon. He was going to take his complaint to the Commanding General, but the rocket silenced him.

I had told Bernie the facts and he had grinned at me.

"Well, don't do it again Jack. I might not be around to bail you out," and that was that.

At least, it was for a time, but I was always short of money.

I got tied up with another Vietnamese girl; a dancer at one of the gaudy, noisy clubs American servicemen frequented. She held out for money; that's what most Vietnamese girls thought about. So one night, when I was really turned on, I walked into another moneychanger's shop. I wasn't taking any chances this time. There was a thunderstorm going on, plus a hail of Viet rockets and the noise drowned my shot. I thought no more of killing an old Vietnamese than I would have shooting a wild duck. I collected a thousand dollars out of his open safe. It was enough to get me a good time with the girl and have something in hand. I did this three times. Each time I knocked of the moneychanger and then my conscience caught up on me. I began to dream about these old men. I kept seeing their eyes, full of terror, as I shot them. These eyes followed me around even when I was servicing Olson's kite. So I dropped it. Sitting in this luxe Cadillac, the eyes came back.

Kendrick was saying. "What have I on my mind? Bernie must tell you that. It's his operation but there is one thing I would like to ask you. Bernie said you would do anything for big money. The operative word, of course, is 'anything.' May I ask if that is your thinking?"

"It depends on what big money means," I said.

He nodded.

"That is the correct answer." He released cigar smoke that was immediately taken out of the car by a small but efficient extractor fan. "Yes . . . how big? Would a quarter of a million interest you?"

I felt a prickle run up my spine, but I kept my cool.

"It would interest anyone."

"I'm not talking about anyone." There was a sudden impatient snap in his voice. "I'm asking you."

"It depends."

"It is a simple question, cheri. Would you do anything for a quarter of a million dollars?"

"I'll have to talk to Bernie."

"Quite right." Kendrick picked up a tiny microphone. "We'll return, Yuko."

The Cadillac stopped, turned and headed back to the City.

"Quite an operation," I said. "First, Bernie sells me on a phoney job. Then Pam seduces me. Now you appear on the scene, talking about a quarter of a million dollars. It's not what I call a well-planned operation. It's too hurried. Suppose I go to the cops right now and tell them what is happening. Do you think they would be interested?"

Kendrick closed his eyes. He looked like an aged dolphin, at rest.

"They might, cheri, but I think they would be more interested in you." He shifted his wig, still keeping his eyes closed. "But don't let us talk about the police. It is always a depressing subject. There's money to be had and your cut would be a quarter of a million. You must talk to Bernie and you can always say no. If you say no, you can then take a plane back to your little town and spend the rest of your days trying to make some kind of living. That, of course, is your privilege, but on the other hand you can come in with us and become rich."

I lit a cigarette.

"I'll talk to Bernie."

We sat in silence until the Caddy pulled up outside L'Espandon where Pam and de Mamey were waiting.

As I got out of the car, Kendrick said, "I hope we can work together, cheri. I have confidence in you."

I paused to stare at him.

"That's more than I have in you." I joined Pam who was already moving to where she had parked the Mini.

"You in this too?" I asked as we folded ourselves into the tiny car.

"Did Claude talk to you?"

"You know he did. You threw him at me didn't you? I'm asking you: are you in this too?"

She started the motor and began driving the little car fast back towards the airport.

"You'd better talk to Bernie."

"That still doesn't answer my question, and I want it answered."

She shrugged.

"Yes, I'm in it. Bernie will explain it to you."

"If he handles the rest of the operation the way he's handled it so

far, I wouldn't touch it."

She shot me a quick hard glance.

"What do you mean?"

"It's so phoney. This phoney excuse to get me here, then throwing you at me, then you throwing that fat horror at me. Was this all Bernie's idea?"

"Well, you're interested, aren't you?"

"The money interests me, but apart from the money, and it'll take a lot of convincing before I'll believe that kind of money, the operation, so far, stinks."

"You must talk to Bernie."

"You can say that again."

We drove the rest of the way in silence and when she pulled up outside my cabin, she switched on her sexy smile.

"Let's spend the rest of the night together Jack." She began to get out of her car, but I stopped her.

"No." I stared at her. "You're Bernie's girl. . . remember?"

She looked as if she were going to hit me. I just continued to stare at her until she looked away, then I slid out of the car and walked over to my cabin.

I was up and sipping coffee on the porch when Tim O'Brien came out of his cabin. The time was 06.45 and he looked at me, surprised.

"You're early."

"I thought I'd come down to the site," I said and finished my coffee. "If there's some job you can give me that I can do. I'll be glad."

"Know anything about blasting?"

"Not a thing."

He grinned.

"Know anything about bulldozers?"

"Sure."

"Fine. . . then you look after the bulldozers and I'll look after the blasting." We got in the jeep. "So you've decided you want to work?"

"When I get paid I give value. But get this straight, Tim you're the boss. Tell me what you want done and I'll try to do it."

So I spent the day in the heat, the dust and the noise. Four times I was called on to repair a bulldozer and I did it. Engines were simple to me. I got along fine with the negro crew who worked well but hadn't any idea how to cope with a stalled engine. I didn't see anything of O'Brien until lunchtime. From the bangs, he was doing plenty of blasting. We had lunch together under a tree: hamburgers and coffee. He asked me how I liked the job and I said it was fine. He gave me a curious stare, but didn't take it further.

Before going to sleep that night, I thought over what had happened. It looked to me that Olson was planning some kind of steal and he

wanted me in on it, but wasn't sure of me. This idea, and I told myself I could be quite wrong, startled me. I would never have thought that Olson could be bent. I decided that I had better work or someone might begin to wonder what I was doing here.

It was sound thinking because around 16.00 the following day while I was clearing a gas feed and was cursing, I saw the three negroes, who were standing around watching me, suddenly stiffen as if they had been goosed. Their big black eyes rolled, showing the whites and I looked over my shoulder.

There was a woman standing a few yards from me, surveying me. What a woman! I knew at once she couldn't be anyone else but Mrs. Lane Essex. Starting from the top of her head and reading downwards, she had Venetian red hair that hung to her shoulders in long, natural waves: a broad forehead, big violet-coloured eyes, a thin nose, a firm mouth. Quite an inadequate description. She was the most gorgeous looking woman I had ever seen and she made Pam Osborn look like a cheap hooker. Her body was something a saint would have thoughts about: long, long legged, full breasted. She was wearing a white linen shirt tucked into white jodhpurs and knee high, glittering black boots. Some yards behind her, a negro in white held the bridles of two horses.

She flicked one of her boots with a riding whip and her violet eyes continued to survey me the way a cattle dealer will survey a prize bull he might or might not be going to buy.

I began to wipe the dirt and grease of my hands with a jump of oily waste, aware of the tensions of the three negroes who very carefully, very slowly, as if backing away from a puff adder, moved out of the scene. They kept on moving until they were lost in the dust.

"Who are you?" There was an arrogant snap in her voice that made me remember that Pam had described this woman as the blueprint for the biggest bitch in the world.

I decided to play this one humble.

"Jack Crane, ma'am," I said. "Is there something I can do for you?"

This fazed her a little. I could see that by her frown and the way she shifted her elegant feet.

"I don't remember seeing you before."

"That's right, ma'am." I kept my expression wooden. "I've just arrived. I'm working for Mr. O'Brien."

"Oh." She paused but continued to examine me. "Where's O'Brien?"

Just then there was a hell of a bang and the two horses shied, nearly over-throwing the negro who began struggling with them. I could see he was in trouble and I slid past her and caught the reins of the biggest horse and by sheer brute strength brought him to a standstill. The negro had all he could do to handle the other horse.

"No place for horses, ma'am," I said. "We're blasting."

She came to me, snatched the reins out of my hand and swung herself onto the saddle. The horse reared up, and she gave him a flick of her whip and brought him down to stand trembling but mastered.

The negro swung himself onto his horse.

"Take him away, Sam," she said, "before another bang."

The negro rode off fast, leaving her looking down at me.

"You know something about horses?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. I don't dig anything without brakes."

She smiled.

"You handled Borgia well enough. Thank you."

Then the mother of all bangs went off it sounded as if a five hundred pound aerial bomb had exploded at our feet.

She was under the impression she had the horse under control so she was relaxed. The bang shook me and shook her.

What it did to the horse was nobody's business. It reared and snaked and she hadn't a chance to stay on. She was thrown heavily as the horse took off. There was nothing I could do in that split second she hung in the air, then I started forward, but was much too late. She landed on her shoulders and her head hit the tarmac and there she remained, still gorgeous to look at, but out to the world.

As I knelt beside her, a ring of gaping negroes formed. I didn't know if she had broken her back and I was scared stupid to touch her

"Get O'Brien!" I bawled "Get me a jeep!"

The snap in my voice brought action. Four or five of them ran wildly down the tarmac towards the blasting site. Two others rushed into the dust.

Gently, I touched her and she opened her eyes.

"Are you hurt?"

Her eyes closed.

"Mrs. Essex! Can I move you?"

Again her eyes opened She shook her head and the glassy look went out of those wonderful violet eyes "I'm all right. She moved her arms, then her legs. "God! My head!"

"Take it easy." I looked around. A jeep skidded to a standstill.

A big buck was at the wheel, his eyes rolling. "I'll take you to hospital." I gathered her up in my arms and she moaned a little.

I carried her to the jeep and got in beside the negro, holding her across my knees. "Get to the hospital," I told him. "Not fast . . . be careful."

The negro stared at the woman, let in the clutch and began a slow drive along the tarmac. It took ten minutes to reach the airport's hospital. Someone must have phoned Two interns, a couple of nurses and a grey-haired man in a white coat surrounded the jeep as it

stopped.

There was a stretcher and everything was very efficient.

They had her off my lap and onto the stretcher and inside the hospital in seconds.

I sat there wondering if by moving her I had done damage and the thought made me sweat.

A jeep came roaring up and O'Brien tumbled out. I told him what had happened.

"Hell!" He wiped his sweaty face. "What did she want to come down there for? She's always sticking her goddamn nose into anything that doesn't concern her! This could lose me my job when Essex hears about it!"

I shoved by him and entered the air-conditioned coolness of the hospital. There was a nurse at the reception desk.

"How is she?" I asked

"Dr. Winters is examining her now." She regarded me as if I were a bum begging a dime.

I hesitated, then seeing one of the interns who had handled her come out through a doorway, I went to him. "How is she? Did I do wrong moving her?"

"You did dead right," he said and smiled. "Nothing broken, but concussion. She's asking about her horse."

"Okay. Tell her not to worry about it. I'll take care of the horse."

As I started towards the exit, I heard the intern say to the nurse, "Get Mr. Essex and snap it up!"

I went out into the hot sunshine, got in the jeep and started off in the direction where the horse had bolted. O'Brien had gone. It took me two long sweaty hours to come up with the horse. It was at the far end of the airport in a thicket and it was only luck that I spotted it. It had got over its scare and I had no trouble tying it to the jeep and I drove slowly back with the horse trotting behind.

Mrs. Essex's groom appeared from nowhere as I pulled up outside the hospital. He grinned at me and took charge of the horse.

I went into the hospital and to the reception desk.

The nurse regarded me, lifting her eyebrows.

"Yes?"

"Will you arrange to tell Mrs. Essex I've found her horse and it is safe and undamaged," I said. "It's news that might do her good."

She inclined her head.

"And you are . . . ?"

"Jack Crane. Mrs. Essex knows me."

Sudden doubt came into her eyes. Suddenly it entered her stupid, snobby mind that in spite of my sweat, filthy hands and shabby clothes, I just might be someone important in the Essex kingdom.

"I'll tell Dr. Winters at once, Mr. Crane. Thank you for telling us."

I gave her a long hard stare, then nodding, I went back to the jeep and drove to the site.

As I got out of the jeep, I heard another bang from the blasting site. At least, O'Brien wasn't stopping work. He didn't give a goddamn about Mrs. Lane Essex, but I did.

I remembered the feel of her body as I had held her. I remembered those violet eyes and the Venetian red hair against my face as I lifted her.

I walked across to the stalled bulldozer and began work on it again. As I worked I thought of her. I was still thinking of her when the whistle blew and we knocked off for the day.

Back in my cabin, I took a much-needed shower. I was getting into a pair of slacks when there came a knock on my door. Thinking it was Tim, I shouted to come in and reached for a shirt.

The door opened and Pam Osborn slid in. She quickly shut the door and I saw her face was pale and her eyes angry.

"What do you want?" I didn't want her here. "Run away, baby." I tucked in my shirt. "I made a mistake about you."

I could see from the expression on her face she hadn't heard what I had said.

"Must you act like a moron?" she demanded "Now you're under a spotlight and that's just what Bernie didn't want."

I moved over to the table and sat on it.

"What are you yakking about?"

"It's all over the airport. You taking that bitch to hospital and then finding her goddamn horse."

"What's so wrong about it?"

"Everyone is asking who this Jack Crane is. Don't you see - every one of the creeps here would have given their right arms to have done what you did?"

"What the hell did you expect me to do? Leave her lying there?"

"It's the horse!" She clenched her fists, then unclenched them. "That bitch cares more about that horse than she does about herself, her husband or even her money! Couldn't you have thought of that instead of spending hours looking for the blasted brute when anyone could have found it?"

"How was I to know?"

"And another thing. . . what made you start working with O'Brien? Didn't Bernie tell you to supervise him and to keep out of sight? Didn't he tell you not to mix with any of the gang? You have to go out there and fool around with the machines! When Bernie hears about this, he'll blow his stack!"

I began to get angry.

“Oh, shove off” I said. “I’m not taking talk like that from you! I’ll talk to Bernie. Now get the hell out of here!”

“I came to warn you, you jerk! Before long the establishment will investigate you. The grapevine here is really something. Have a story ready. This sonofabitch Wes Jackson will be descending on you. He’s Essex’s manager. Watch him! He’s so sharp he could cut you by just looking at you. He’ll want to know everything there is to know about you. What you are doing here. Who you are. Why Bernie hasn’t put you on the pay roll. Have a story ready or we’ll be sunk. Do you understand?”

“No.” I stared at her. “I don’t understand and I don’t like any of it. If you. . .”

The sound of a car pulling up outside my cabin made both of us turn fast to the window.

“He’s here . . . Wes Jackson!” Pam’s face was whiter than a fresh fall of snow. “He mustn’t find me here.” She looked around wildly, then darted into the bathroom and closed the door.

That left me standing there on my own.

Wes Jackson stood in the doorway of my cabin like an undersized King Kong, but not all that undersized. He was around 6 ft. 5 ins., massively built and around thirty-two or three years of age. He had a turnip-shaped head that sat on his vast shoulders without suggesting he had any neck. His small nose, his small mouth and his small eyes struggled to survive in a sea of pink-white fat. His jet-black hair was close cropped. He wore heavy black shell glasses that slightly magnified his sea-green eyes. He was immaculately dressed in a blue blazer with some fancy badge on the pocket, white linen slacks and some club tie pinned to a white shirt with a large gold tie pin.

"Mr. Crane?"

The tiny mouth went through the motions of a smile: the sea-green eyes, like points of ice picks dipped in green paint, moved over me.

I knew at once this man was a natural born sonofabitch and I would have to handle him with care.

"That's correct," I said and waited.

He moved his bulk into the cabin and closed the door.

"I'm Wesley Jackson. I take care of Mr. Essex's affairs."

I nearly said that must be nice for him, but instead I said.

"Is that right?"

"That's right Mr. Crane. Mrs. Essex asked me to come here and thank you for finding her horse."

"How is she?"

He edged further into the room and slowly settled himself in a lounging chair. It creaked under his weight.

"She had quite a fall, but you know about that." He shook his turnip head, and his fat face expressed sorrow. "Well, she could be worse. Slight concussion, but nothing really serious."

"Fine. When I saw her come down I thought she had broken her back."

He winced.

"Happily no."

He crossed one enormous leg over the other and seeing that he was making himself comfortable, I took a chair opposite him.

"It was very thoughtful of you, Mr. Crane, to go searching for her horse," he went on. "No one seemed to have thought of it. Her horse is important to her."

I let that one drift and waited.

"Mrs. Essex is appreciative."

I let that one drift too.

He studied his beautifully manicured finger nails, then shot me a sudden hard look.

"You work here, Mr. Crane?"

Here it comes, I thought. This fat fink isn't wasting time on me.

"You could say that."

He nodded.

"Yes." A pause. "You don't appear on our payroll, Mr. Crane, yet you tell me you are working for us."

I put a blank look on my face.

"I didn't say that, Mr. Jackson. I'm working for Colonel Olson."

He nibbled at his thumbnail while he stared at me.

"Colonel Olson engaged you?"

"Maybe I'd better explain." I gave him my frank expression with a slight apologetic smile. It didn't seem to make any impact on him but I couldn't imagine anything making an impact on him. "Colonel Olson and I served together in Saigon. He flew a bomber. I kept him flying." I was speaking very casually. "I heard he was working for Mr. Essex and as I was looking for something to do and as he and I got along fine together I wrote, asking him if he could get me a job here. He wrote back and said there was nothing at the moment but if I were free, how would I like to come here and help out on the runway. He said he could give me a cabin and food, but there would be no money. I could look on it as a vacation. He said later he would talk to the staff manager and maybe there would be a vacancy. I was bored staying at home. I have my Army gratuity and I wanted to see Paradise City and I wanted very much to see Colonel Olson again. . .he's a fine man. Mr. Jackson, but I don't have to tell you that. . .so . . . here I am."

He nodded his turnip head several times and his little eyes half closed.

"I'm afraid Colonel Olson is at fault. He had no business having you here: no business at all."

I didn't say anything.

"This is most irregular." He frowned. "Perhaps you don't realise it. Everyone who works for us is insured. Suppose you met with an accident on the runway? You could sue us out of sight and we wouldn't be covered."

"Is that right?" I gave him my humble, blank face. "I'm sure Colonel Olson never thought of that nor did I."

He seemed to like my humble face better than my frank face for his tight little lips lifted into what I suppose he imagined to be a smile.

"I can see that. Colonel Olson is a good pilot, but he is no businessman. What exactly are you doing on the runway?"

"I'm working under O'Brien. I keep the bulldozers in operation. The crew don't know about engines."

The smile went away.

“But isn’t that O’Brien’s job?”

“He’s taking care of the blasting. Colonel Olson thought it would save time for me to take care of the bulldozers. I understand the runway has to be gotten ready fast.”

“I’m quite aware of the need to get the runway finished.”

The steel in his voice warned me I was talking too much.

“I’m sure, Mr. Jackson. I was just trying to explain.”

“We must regularize this business. Please report to the staff office and they will sign you on as one of the crew. You will be paid the usual union rates and you will be insured.”

“Thank you for the suggestion, but I won’t do that. You see, Mr. Jackson, I am on vacation. I’m not looking for that kind of work. I like messing around with engines but not for long. I was just helping the Colonel and enjoying myself.”

This threw him. He stiffened and stared at me “You mean you don’t want to work for us?”

“Not as a ganger. I’m a fully qualified aero-engineer.”

His eyebrows crawled almost into his black hair.

“A fully qualified aero-engineer?”

“That’s correct. Before Vietnam, I was with Lockheed.”

He began nibbling at his thumb nail again.

“I see.” He paused, then went on, “Mrs. Essex is pleased with you Crane. Perhaps we could find a place here in your own line. Would that interest you?”

I noted he had dropped the “mister.”

I had a sudden idea he wouldn’t be wasting his busy time with me unless he had to. *Mrs. Essex is pleased with you.* That gave me the clue. This fat fink had been sent by her to do something for me in return for finding her horse. It was a guess, but I felt it was a good one.

“That depends on the job and the pay.”

He recrossed his legs. I saw by the sour expression on his face he hated me the way a snake hates a mongoose.

“Could you service a Condor XJ 7?”

“I’m a fully qualified aero-engineer,” I told him. “That means I can handle any kite, providing I have a good working crew.”

“I see.”

I had him fazed. I could tell that by the way he again recrossed his legs and again took a nibble at his thumbnail.

“Well. . .”

A long pause, then he got to his feet.

“I must see what I can do. You would like to work for us?”

“As I said: it would depend on the pay and the job.”

He peered at me.

"What did Lockheed pay you?"

"Twenty, but that was four years ago."

He nodded. I was certain he would contact Lockheed and check, but that didn't worry me. I was a white-headed boy with Lockheed four years ago. I knew they would root for me.

"Oblige me by staying away from the runway," he said as he moved to the door. "Please make yourself quite at home. I will tell the staff manager that you can enjoy all our facilities. I must talk to Mr. Essex."

"I wouldn't want to stick around here, doing nothing for long Mr. Jackson."

Again he peered at me as if I were a reptile behind glass "You will have a car at your disposal. Why not enjoy the city?" I could see he was hating this. "Go to the staff office. Mr. Macklin will provide you with funds." His mouth pursed as if he had bitten into a quince. "It's Mrs. Essex's wish."

I gave him my graven image face.

"That's nice of her."

He stalked out of the cabin, climbed into a Bentley coupe, driven by a negro chauffeur in the Essex bottle green uniform and was driven away.

Pam came out of the shower room. She stood staring at me, her eyes wide.

"I'd never have believed it!" she said breathlessly. "I don't know what Bernie will say."

I lit a cigarette, my mind busy.

"Jack! Bernie will be furious."

I looked at her. She now bored me.

"Run away, baby. I have thinking to do."

"Listen to me . . .!" she began, her eyes snapping with rage.

"You heard me. Piss off I have thinking to do."

"Bernie made a mistake," she said, her voice unsteady, her face white. "Do him a favour. Get out of here! We'll find someone else! If you really are Bernie's friend, get out and fast!"

I regarded her.

"You won't find anyone else," I said, "so run away baby and stop shooting of at the mouth. I'm in and now it's up to Bernie. I'm not asking you to explain the set-up, but so far, as I've told you before, it stinks. I'm getting the idea Bernie isn't the man I thought he was. He could need help." Then putting a bark in my voice, I snapped, "Beat it!"

She went out slamming the door behind her.

I sat still, smoked and thought.

I thought of that lush body, the Venetian red hair and the big violet eyes—the most exciting woman, to me in the world.

I went along to see Mr. Macklin, the staff manager and caught him just as he was about to go home. The time was 19.00, but apart from giving me a quick look up and down with eyes that had the same ice pick quality as Wes Jackson's his smile as he shook hands with me seemed sincere enough.

"Ah yes. Mr. Crane," he said. "I have had instructions about you from Mr. Jackson." He slightly lowered his voice when mentioning Jackson's name. I was surprised he didn't genuflect "I have an envelope for you with the compliments of Essex Enterprises." He went to his desk and raked around and finally came up with a large white envelope. "If you want a car, do please go to our transport department—it is open twenty-four hours a day—you can have what you like."

I took the envelope, thanked him, said I would like a car and went with him to his office door. He pointed out the transport department, a hundred yards or so from where we stood, shook hands again and I left him.

The transport people had also been alerted. They asked me what car I would like. I said I didn't mind so long as it was small. They fitted me up with a 2000 Alfa Romeo which suited me and I drove back to my cabin.

Inside the envelope was five one hundred dollar bills and passes to three movie houses, the casino, four restaurants, two clubs and three nightclubs. Each pass was stamped: Essex Enterprises: admit two.

I found O'Brien settling down to television. He didn't need a lot of persuading to have a night out with me.

We had a hell of a night out: doing the City in style and it only cost me tips.

Slightly drunk, and on our way back to the airport around 02.00, O'Brien said, "From now on I'll keep my eye on Mrs. E's horse. Boy! Did you play that beautifully!"

"It's a natural talent," I said and decanted him from the car, then going into my cabin, I stripped of and rolled into bed.

Before I turned the light off I did a little more thinking.

This wouldn't last long. I told myself. Mrs. Essex wasn't going to keep me in luxury for more than a week, if that. Right at this moment I was a very rich woman's whim. First. I would listen to Olson's proposition. Then I would decide, whether to play along with him or to try to turn the whim of this very rich woman into something much more substantial than a whim.

I told myself I was drunk enough to make dreams. I thought of her again: the red hair, the violet eyes, the feel of her body.

Reaching for the moon? That was old hat now. Men went to the moon. Why not me?

The sound of an aircraft coming in to land brought me awake. I

looked blearily at the bedside clock which registered 10.15. I rolled out of bed and was in time to see the dust of a Condor settled on the runway. This meant that Lane Essex, plus Bernie, were back.

There was Jackson's Bentley already rushing to the landing point as well as three jeeps. I decided it would be quite a while before Olson would get to me so I took a shower, shaved, put on a sweat shirt and slacks and then called room service. In spite of the heavy drinking of the previous night, I was hungry.

I ordered waffles, eggs on grilled ham and coffee.

The man taking my order sounded as if I were granting him a favour.

"In ten minutes, Mr. Crane," he said, "not a minute more."

I thanked him, slapped after shave on my face and sat in a lounging chair to wait. I dug for this VIP treatment, but I wasn't kidding myself it would last.

The breakfast arrived in eight minutes. . . I timed it.

After eating, I read the newspaper that had been delivered with the meal. Every now and then I heard a bang that told me O'Brien was still blasting.

At midday, I got bored waiting. Olson must be tied up, so I decided I would go into the city and use one of the credit cards.

As I was crossing to the door, the telephone bell rang.

I scooped up the receiver.

"Mr. Crane?" A woman's voice, very cool and abrupt.

"Could be: why?"

A pause. I could imagine her change of expression.

"Mr. Jackson wants you. A car is on its way for you. . . in twenty minutes."

Playing a hunch, I said. "In twenty minutes, I'll be in the city. Mention this to Mr. Jackson," and I hung up.

I lit a cigarette as the telephone bell rang again.

"Mr. Crane?" There was now an anxious note in her voice.

"That's me. You've just caught me. What is it?"

"Would you please wait until the car arrives? Mr. Jackson wants to talk to you."

"That's a nicer approach, baby," I said, "but it so happens I'm not in the mood to talk to Mr. J. right now. . . it's too early in the morning," and I hung up.

I waited, smoking, staring up at the ceiling, wondering if I was playing my cards right but all the time thinking of that phrase: *Mrs. Essex is pleased with you*. Seconds later the telephone bell rang again. "Yeah?"

"Mr. Crane, please cooperate." The voice sounded frantic. "It's Mrs. Essex who wants to meet you."

“So why didn’t you say it before?”

“It’s Mrs. Essex who is asking for you. Could you, please, make yourself available? The car is on its way.”

“I’ll wait.” I paused, then went on “and listen, baby, the next time you call me, get the snooty tone out of your voice. I don’t like it.” I hung up.

Ten minutes later, Jackson’s Bentley pulled up outside my cabin. The negro chauffeur, bowing and grinning, had the rear door open for me. I climbed in and was wafted away at high speed.

The two guards at the airport entrance saluted me. The Bentley took me along the coast road, then up behind the city into the hills. While I was being driven, I leaned back against the English leather upholstery and thought about her.

Okay. . . a pipe dream, but life must be made up, sometimes, of pipe dreams. . . how else can anyone survive in this world of violence and madness?

We arrived at the entrance gates of the Essex estate. Two guards in bottle green had the gates open. We swept through and up a quarter of a mile of drive, bordered with trees, lawns, flowering shrubs and beds of roses.

The Bentley drew up at the front door: a tricky, rich affair of wrought iron and glass. A fat, white haired English looking butler was standing, waiting. He smiled at me: that patronising smile only the English can produce.

“Please come this way, Mr. Crane.”

I followed his fat back down a wide corridor, plastered with modem paintings that had to be genuine.

Finally, we arrived through double glass doors onto a vast patio with an ultra violet glass roof to shield the weak and the weary, plus orchids and troughs packed with multi-coloured begonias. In the centre of this opulence a vast fountain played into a vaster basin in which tropical fish swam as if doing a favour.

In this scene of richness, I found her.

She was lying on one of those things on wheels with a headrest and yellow cushions. Wes Jackson was seated slightly away from her, nursing what looked like a dry martini.

As I came out onto the patio, Jackson heaved his bulk up and got to his feet.

“Come on in. Mr. Crane,” he said and his smile, was like a drop of lemon juice on a live oyster. I noted the “mister” had returned. He turned to her. “You’ve met before, Mrs. Essex. I don’t have to make introductions.”

She looked up at me and extended her hand. I moved forward, gripped her hand that felt hot and dry, then released it.

"Are you feeling better?" I asked.

"Thank you: I'm not so bad." The violet eyes were looking me over. I told myself there couldn't be any other woman in the world as glamorous, as sexy, as gorgeous as this one. "It was quite a fall, wasn't it?" She smiled and waved to a chair close to where she was lying. "Sit down, Mr. Crane."

As I sat down, a Jap in white drill materialised from nowhere.

"What will you drink, Mr. Crane?" Jackson asked.

"A coke with bitter."

That threw him and the Jap. They both stared at me. I had been rehearsing that while in the Bentley.

Mrs. Essex laughed

"That's a drink I've never heard of."

"At this hour of the day it suits me. I get to the hard stuff after sunset."

There was a pause and the Jap went away.

Jackson moved to his chair, but stopped short as Mrs. Essex flicked her fingers at him.

"All right, Jackson." she said, "I'm sure you have lots of work to do."

"Yes, Mrs. Essex."

Without looking at me, he faded swiftly and silently from the scene.

"I don't like fat men," she said, "do you?"

"He has a lean and hungry look." I said. "I would rather settle for a fat man than a very lean one."

She nodded.

"So you read Shakespeare"

"I was on an airfield, ten miles outside Saigon for three years. The guy who had my hut before I arrived and who walked into a face full of shrapnel had Shakespeare's plays and an album of blue photos. I spent most of my time looking at the photos and reading the plays."

"Which did you prefer?"

"After a while the photos lost their impact, but the old Bard lingered on."

The Jap came back with a frosted glass of coke and set it on the table beside me as if he was setting down a bomb. He drew back and waited.

"Is that how you like it?" she asked.

"It's fine." I didn't taste it "It was a gag."

She flicked her fingers at the Jap who disappeared.

This finger flicking act of hers impressed me. I wondered if a time would come when she would flick her fingers at me.

"A gag?"

"Just trying to hold my end up," I said. "I'm not used to this opulent

scene. . . at least it fazed Jackson.”

She stared at me then laughed.

“I love that. It certainly did.”

I took out my crumbled pack of cigarettes.

“Could you smoke one of these or are yours gold plated?”

“I don’t smoke.” A pause, then she said. “I find you refreshing, Mr. Crane.”

I lit a cigarette.

“I’m glad. While we are paying compliments, may I tell you, to me, you’re the most glamorous woman I’ve ever seen.”

We stared at each other and she lifted an eyebrow.

“Thank you.” Another pause. “And thank you for finding Borgia. Not one of these stupid people at the airport thought of looking for him. I don’t believe you haven’t ridden a horse. The way you handled Borgia: only a horseman could have done that.”

“That was another gag.” I smiled at her. “I’m like that. Mrs. Essex. . . a gag man. Out in Saigon, I spent most of my time on a horse when I wasn’t working on kites.”

“And, of course, when you weren’t reading Shakespeare or looking at blue photos.”

“That’s it.”

“Would you be interested to work for us?” She shot the question at me the way Ali shoots a jab.

I was expecting it and had my answer ready.

“Would you qualify the word ‘us’?”

She frowned.

“The Essex Enterprises of course!”

“That would mean working for Mr. Jackson?” I regarded her, then went on, “Just for a moment I thought you were suggesting I should work for you.”

This threw her as I hoped it would. She tried to hold my stare, but her eyes shifted away.

“I asked Jackson if there was some interesting opening we could offer you.” She still looked away from me. “He seems to think that might be difficult, but then he always makes difficulties.”

“I can imagine.” I saw she was back on an even keel again and I smiled at her. “I appreciate this very much, Mrs. Essex: especially you asking me here. After all I only found your horse, but if you could find me a job here. . .” I let it drift. “I would like to talk to Colonel Olson. Frankly, working for Mr. Jackson isn’t my idea of fun and I like fun.”

I got to my feet. “Thank you for your hospitality.” I was now standing over her. “Now, if you’ll do your finger flicking act, I’ll disappear as they all disappear.”

She stared up at me and there was that sudden thing in her eyes

that all women get when they want a man. I've known a lot of women in my life and that look is unmistakable. I could scarcely believe it but it was there and then it went away: like a green traffic light changing to red.

"Goodbye, Mr. Crane."

"So long." I paused and looked right into those big violet eyes. "I know this doesn't buy me anything, but I want you to know that, right now, I'm looking at the most beautiful woman in the world."

I made that my exit line.

There was no sign of Bernie Olson when the Bentley decanted me outside my cabin. I went in, wondering if there was a note for me but didn't find one.

The time was after 13.00 and I was now hungry. I rang room service and asked for something to eat.

"The special is excellent, Mr. Crane: baby lamb with all the trimmings. Should I send that over?"

I said it would do fine and hung up.

During the drive back to the airport I had thought about Mrs. Essex. Could I have been mistaken about that look that had come into her eyes? I don't think so, but it seemed fantastic that a woman in her position could have got turned on by a guy like me. So okay, accepting that fact she had been turned on it didn't mean a thing. A woman like that wouldn't take risks when married to Lane Essex. She could have her private thoughts but putting those thoughts into action was something else beside.

All the same, she had me turned on. I would have given a couple of years of my life to spend a night with her: that, I knew would be an experience that I would never forget.

After a while, the meal arrived and I ate it. By this time it was 14.23. While I was lighting a cigarette, the telephone rang.

"Hi! Jack!" It was Olson.

"Hi!"

"Have you a car?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think you can find your way to that cafe-bar?"

"No problem."

"Suppose we meet there in half an hour?"

"Okay."

He hung up.

Well, I thought as I crushed out my cigarette and got to my feet, I would now know what this was all about. As I left the cabin and got into the Alfa there came a distant bang of blasting. O'Brien was still at it.

It took me twenty minutes to reach the cafe-bar. The white Jag was

parked in the shade. I parked the Alfa by it, then walked up the creaking steps to the veranda.

Olson was sitting, nursing a cup of coffee. He waved to me and I joined him.

The girl came out and smiled at me.

“Coffee.”

“Well, Jack, seems like you have been having yourself quite a ball,” Olson said as the girl went away. “It also seems that you have forgotten the Army faster than I had imagined.”

The girl came back with the coffee and went away.

“What does that mean?”

“You’ve forgotten how to obey orders.” There was a snap in his voice that annoyed me.

“You said yourself we’re no longer in the Army. Look, Bernie, I’m not going to make any excuses. You dumped me here on a phoney job. You didn’t take me into your confidence. So I’ve played it the way the cards fell. If you don’t like the way I’ve played it, say so and I’ll get out of here.”

He tried to stare at me, but failed. His eyes shifted. I could see he was sweating.

“Well, maybe there’s no damage done, but I wanted you to keep out of the spotlight. From what I hear, you’re now in good with Mrs. Essex.” He stirred his coffee, not looking at me. “Maybe that’s a good thing. I hear you were up at the house this morning.”

“Your grapevine’s working well.”

He forced a smile.

“Don’t let’s get off on the wrong foot Jack. This operation is too important. I’m relying on you. I need your help.”

“Look, Bernie, up to now you’ve handled this wrong. Why the hell didn’t you tell me what you’re cooking when you first brought me here instead of feeding me this crap about building a runway? If you had done that, there wouldn’t have been this foul up.”

“I couldn’t. Kendrick insisted on seeing you before you joined us. He’s like that. . . he wouldn’t trust his mother. Then I had to fly the boss to New York: that was unexpected.”

“Kendrick? That fat queer? Where does he fit in?”

“He’s financing it.”

I lit a cigarette.

“Okay, Bernie, suppose you tell it.”

He fidgeted with the spoon, put it down, picked it up, tapped it against his cup.

“Yes.” A pause, then he said. “You remember my last mission in Saigon? You remember the airfield was bombed and your hut was destroyed?”

I stared at him

“What’s that got to do with this?”

“A lot. You remember I told you to move in with me?”

Bernie put down the spoon, pushed his half-finished coffee away, then drew it towards him. “You remember I had the bed and you the couch?”

“I remember.”

A long pause, then Bernie said quietly, “You talked in your sleep Jack. Three old money changers I’ll never forget that night, listening to you muttering. Then later when I got this itch to make big money and when I hatched out this plan to get it and when I realised I had to have a top class man to help me, I thought of you.” He put down the spoon and looked directly at me. “I figured that if you could kill three old men for around \$5000, you would do a lot more for a quarter of a million.” He ran his hand over his sweating face, then asked. “Am I right?”

I drank some coffee.

“It depends, Bernie. A quarter of a million is nice money, but I was safe enough in Saigon . . . how safe would I be here?”

“It’s safe enough. That’s the least of the problem. Right now, you’re my problem. I can understand what you did out there. The Viets meant nothing to any of us. Shooting an old Viet under battle conditions is something I can accept, but this thing. . .well, if it comes unstuck, then you could go away for a long time as I could I can’t see how it could come unstuck. I’ve thought a lot about it and I reckon we have a 95 percent chance of getting away with it.”

“I could accept those odds,” I said.

“Yes.” He picked up the spoon and began to fidget with it again. “What I want to know Jack, is how you react to this offer.”

“Suppose you tell me about it? Then I can tell you.”

He shook his head.

“I can’t do that unless you tell me you’re in with us. If I tell you the plan and you duck out. . . where are we left?”

I stared at him.

“That’s telling me you don’t trust me to keep my mouth shut.”

He looked away from me.

“I’m not the only one in this. Either a quarter of a million persuades you to come in with us without being told or it’s no dice.”

“You didn’t talk this way to me in Saigon, I’m not walking into anything blind. You either trust me or you don’t. That’s my final word.”

We stared at each other, then he gave me a sudden smile and it did me good to see it. It was the kind of smile he used to give me before he took off on a bombing mission.

"I apologise Jack. Okay. . . here it is. If you don't want it, I'll give you three thousand dollars and you go home and forget it. . . right?"

"Right."

"I've been working for Essex now for a year. I've had enough of him and his wife. There's no future in it. Working for them has aged me. I don't have to tell you: you can see for yourself. Pilots are a dime a dozen. Essex could replace me like that." He snapped his fingers. "So I got to thinking." He stared down the sandy road at the distant beach. "This brings us to Pam. When I took over the airport, she was there, as deputy air hostess. Maybe this will be hard for you to understand. She and I have a thing for each other. She can't help being over sexed. This is something I can't do anything about, but we really mean a great deal to each other. When she has to have it, I look away." He took out his handkerchief and wiped of his sweating hands.

"We were out one night, eating at L'Espandon where she has credit and she introduced me to Claude Kendrick. You've met him. Kendrick not only runs a profitable art gallery, but he is also the biggest fence on the coast. He is in the market for any goods to be sold: no matter what. Over coffee, I got to talking about Essex's new plane. This is quite a job Jack. The final bill will work out around ten million dollars. It's. . ."

"Hey! Wait a minute!" I stared at him. "Did you say ten million?"

"That's right."

"I don't believe it. You can buy a Viscount for two and a half. Ten! Are you sure?"

"This is a unique plane Jack. There's no other plane like it in the world. Essex's experts have been working on it for four years. Essex has poured money into it to get it right. This is not a mass-produced job. It's like a Rolls Royce car: nothing but the best. I won't go into details now. You'll probably see it for yourself. Two weeks after my meeting with Kendrick, Pam told me he would like to see me again. We met and he told me he had a client who would buy the plane if I flew it to Yucatan. The cut for me would be a million. I told him he was crazy. He said there was no hurry, but he would like me to think about it. So I started thinking. The plane wouldn't be ready for test flights for another three months. The more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that it could be done." He looked up, regarding me. "I would need the right crew. I have a copilot lined up. I have Pam. I need a flight mechanic—you. How do you like it so far?"

I lit a cigarette while I thought about it.

"It's an idea. Could I dig at it, shooting off the cuff?"

"That's what I want."

"Okay. You have a ten million dollar aircraft. Don't let's worry about how you steal it. Let's first look at the financial end. You get a

million. I get a quarter. Pam gets something and also the copilot!"

"That's about it."

"Kendrick sells the kite for five million. That's half price. He takes no risk and puts three million in his pocket. Do you think that's a good proposition?"

Bernie shifted uneasily.

"You just said a quarter of a million was nice money."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"I don't know how much Kendrick will collect: could be a lot less than five."

I shook my head.

"No. I've met him: he's all shark. He'll probably get seven. He's gyping you."

Olson shrugged. There was again that weary, cynical look in his eyes that gave me no confidence in him.

"I'll settle for a million. With that kind of money Jack, I could set up an air taxi service in Mexico. You could come into it too."

I finished my lukewarm coffee.

"Suppose we talk to Kendrick. He could be squeezed. Suppose you got two and I got one. That would be better, wouldn't it?"

"Kendrick holds the cards Jack. He has the client. I don't know who he is. Without the client we would be whistling in the wind." He stared at me. "And another thing, I don't think Kendrick can be squeezed."

"Suppose I try? After all who is taking the risk?"

"Well, maybe, but I'll have to discuss this with Pam and Harry."

"Your copilot?"

He nodded.

"Tell me about him."

"Harry Erskine: he's been my copilot for the past nine months. Young: around twenty-four, tough, a good pilot, not easy to get along with, but he's okay."

"What made him come into this set-up?"

"Mrs. Essex dangled herself and he fell for it and then she cut him down to size. That's her speciality: turning it on, making a guy think he's going to get into her bed, then telling him he isn't." Olson looked hard at me. "I don't know how far she's got with you Jack, but watch it. She's a copper plated bitch. Now Harry hates her and has joined us."

I filed that bit of information away in my mind as I said, "So how do you plan to steal a ten million dollar plane?"

"We have time to work out the details. The plane will be delivered on November 1st—two months from now. Harry and I will collect it and fly it down here. The plane will have to be flight tested. Essex

travels a lot and often wants to be flown at night. There'll be no problem about doing a night test flight. So, you, Harry, Pam and I take off on a night flight. We fly out to sea then I'll radio the port engines are on fire. The Air Controller then hears nothing. It'll take him some minutes to get out an alert. By that time we'll be heading for Yucatan, flying wave high to cut radar. Kendrick's client has a runway outside Merida. It's in the bush and jungle. We land there. The details have still to be worked out, but that's the plan."

I thought about it.

"Sounds good," I said finally. "The theory being the plane crashed into the sea and sank without trace?"

"That's it?"

"You have no idea who the client is?"

"No." He must be quite someone to construct a runway."

"Yes."

"So. . . we're dead people once we have radio silence."

"That's right."

"We get the money and we settle in Mexico?"

He nodded.

"Each one of us takes a risk if we go back?"

"We can't go back? If we go back and if any of us is spotted, the operation explodes. As you said . . . we're dead people the moment we go of the air."

"You're sold on this Bernie?"

"Yes. It's big money and I need big money. I want to feel secure." I remembered that fat queer with his ridiculous orange wig talking about security. "With the money I can start an air taxi service. I've already got that lined up. If you would sink some of your cut into it. we could work together. There's a big demand for air taxi services in Mexico." He regarded me. "Well Jack, you now know as much as I do about the set-up. What do you say? Are you in or aren't you?"

"I like it." I got to my feet, "but I want to meet Erskine. Let's all get together, huh?"

Bernie stared uneasily at me.

"Harry's tricky. You may not dig for him."

"What's that mean?"

"I'm telling you: I need him as copilot. He does what I say. You don't have to bother with him."

"This is a steal, Bernie. We all could go away for fifteen years if it's fouled up. This has got to be a team and I'm not working with anyone I can't get along with."

Bernie got to his feet.

"I understand. I'll fix a meeting."

"And Bernie . . ." I stared at him. "Let's have Kendrick at the

meeting as well.”

“We don’t want Kendrick.”

“Yes we do. This is a team and Kendrick is part of it.”

He lifted his hands in a weary gesture.

“I’ll see what can be arranged.”

“Do more than that, Bernie, You, Erskine, Pam. Kendrick and me around a table and let’s talk this thing out.”

“Okay.”

We walked together into the sunshine and paused by our cars.

“I’m not being tricky, Bernie,” I said. “I’m thinking of you as much as I’m thinking of myself.”

He patted my arm.

“That’s why I picked on you. I’m not quite the guy I was and I need your help.”

I watched him drive away in the Jag, then I got into the Alfa.

I sat there for some minutes, thinking, then I drove back to the airport.

Bernie phoned around 19.00 while I was watching a soap opera on T.V. He said the meeting was set up for 21.00 at the cafe-bar "I'll pick you up at 20.30, Jack," he said, "with Pam and Harry."

"Kendrick coming?"

"Yes."

"Fine."

Since I had talked to him and now knew what was cooking, I had done a lot of thinking. His plan looked good, but there were a lot of details to be ironed out. Hijacking a ten million dollar plane could put me in jail for a long time and that was something I didn't dig. This had to be foolproof and I had the idea that Bernie wasn't the man to swing it. There was something about him that didn't jell with me. Pam didn't count: she was an oversexed neurotic. A lot depended on Erskine. If he had the same kind of guts Bernie had, then I'd duck out. I wanted to control the operation. The more I thought about it the more I liked it, but not with Bernie handling it.

Around 20.30, I heard a car pull up outside my cabin. I went to the door. A Buick, with Bernie at the wheel, was coming to a standstill. He waved to me and I climbed in beside him.

There was a man and Pam in the back. It was too dark to get a look at Erskine. He looked big, but that's all I could see of him.

As Bernie set the car moving, he said, "Jack. . . here's Harry."

"Hi!" I said and lifted my hand.

Erskine made no movement. After a long pause, he said, "Hi!"

We drove in silence and fast from the airport to the cafe-bar. Arriving, we all got out and it was still too dark for me to see him. He was bigger than I had imagined. Three inches above me and I'm no dwarf.

Bernie and I walked together. Pam and Erskine came behind us. We climbed the steps to the veranda. It was a hot night and I could hear the waves breaking on the beach in the distance.

There was no one in the cafe. A dim light lit the veranda.

As we settled ourselves at a table, the girl came out, smiling.

Bernie said, "What'll we have?"

I was now looking at Erskine as he was looking at me. The dim light showed me a lean face, small eyes, a flat nose and thin lips: a young, tough, a fighter with jet black hair cut close, sitting on his head like a black cap. He had on a sweat shirt and I could see his muscles: he was built like a boxer.

Pam said she would have a whisky on the rocks. I went along with

that. Erskine said an orange juice with gin. Bernie settled for a coke.

When the girl had gone, Bernie said, "Meet Harry, Jack."

I nodded to Erskine who leant forward, staring at me.

"So what's the idea of this meeting?" he demanded aggressively. "What's eating you?"

"Just a moment," Bernie said sharply. "I'll handle this Jack doesn't think much of the pay-off. I . . ."

"You hold it, Bernie," Erskine said. "This guy is an aero-engineer. . . right?"

Bernie looked uneasily at him.

"You know that, Harry."

"Yeah. So he's not important. You and I have to fly the kite . . . right? So what's he beefing about? We, use him: he gets paid and keeps his snout out of our business . . . right?"

"Look, sonny," I said quietly, "don't act tough. You and Pam are mugs to this kind of operation. Come to that, Bernie isn't all that hot. You have a nice idea, but you're handling it like amateurs. You have a ten million dollar kite and you're selling for a two million pay-off. That tells me what a bunch of amateurs you are."

Erskine braced himself. I saw his big muscles bulge. I had an idea he was going to take a swing at me.

"So you're a pro . . . right?"

"Compared to you three." I said, slightly shifting my chair so I could get up if he started something. "Yes . . . I'm a pro."

"Harry!" Bernie's voice was pleading. "I have confidence in Jack. That's why I brought him in. I think we should let him handle Kendrick. Let's see what he does."

"No!"

This was from Pam.

Bernie looked at her.

"What is it?"

"This man's dangerous." She waved her hands at me. "I know it. He could talk us into trouble."

I laughed.

"You're already in trouble, baby," I said. "I could talk you out of it. But, okay, if you three feel like this, then it's okay with me. I'll dust, but the way you've been handling this, tells me I'll be sending you all a postcard in some jail. I'm great at sending postcards."

Kendrick's Cadillac pulled up outside the cafe-bar.

"Here he comes," I said, pushing back my chair. I looked at Bernie. "Either I handle him or I quit. What's it to be?"

He didn't look at the other two.

"You handle him."

Before the others could react, Kendrick came puffing and blowing

up the steps to join us.

“My darlings! What a dreadful place to meet!” He waddled to the table and Bernie stood up and pushed a chair towards him. “How quite, quite frightful!” He dropped his bulk onto the chair. “Don’t offer me a drink. I’m sure germs are festering on every glass.” He lifted his orange wig and bowed to Pam. “Dear Pam . . . lovely as ever.” He slapped the wig back on his head. “Do tell me. What is all this about? I thought we had it all beautifully arranged.”

“Jack wants to talk to you,” Bernie said.

“Jack?” Kendrick’s little eyes swivelled to me. “What is it, cheri? Aren’t you happy?”

“Let’s cut the grease, Kendrick,” I said. “First, we talk about money . . . then the operation.”

Kendrick released a theatrical sigh.

“A moment, cheri. Are you talking for these three lovely people? Am I to understand that Bernie is no longer leading this operation.”

“He doesn’t talk for me.” Erskine said.

“Nor me,” Pam said.

I looked at Bernie then got to my feet.

“Okay: so I duck out. The majority is overwhelming.”

“Wait!” Bernie looked at Kendrick. “I brought Jack into this because he has the know-how. From now on, he talks for me. I’m running this operation and what I say goes.”

I looked at Pam, then at Erskine.

“You heard the man. Now’s the time for you two to get up and walk.”

Neither of them moved.

I sat down. Kendrick rubbed the end of his nose with a fat finger.

“Well. . . so what’s the trouble Jack?”

I rested my arms on the table and leaned on them, looking directly at him.

“We’re stealing a ten million dollar aircraft,” I said. “That’s called hijacking. We four stand to get life sentences if we foul it up and it could get fouled. But we five are in this together - note the five. I’m including you. We want to know how much your client is paying you.”

Kendrick smiled.

“So you’re worried about the money, cheri?”

“I said cut the grease. How much are you getting?”

“That is my business!” There was a sudden edge to his voice. “Bernie and I made a deal. I pay two million . . . Bernie has accepted this . . . haven’t you, Bernie?” and he looked at Olson.

“Just a moment,” I broke in, “Let’s take a look at it. The kite’s worth ten: it’s brand new. If you’re not blind stupid, and I’m sure you’re not,

you will get at least six for it. That gives you four million profit after expenses for sitting on your fat but and letting us take the risk: do you call that a deal?"

"Six!" He threw up his fat hands, "Cheri! I'll be lucky if I get a million for myself and I'm handling the expenses. Come, come! You mustn't be greedy."

"We want three and a half," I said, "or the deal's off."

"Hey! Just a moment," Erskine broke in. "You. . ."

"Keep out of this!" I snarled at him. "You hear me, Kendrick? Three and a half or the deals off!"

"Suppose we hear what the others say." Kendrick's eyes were now like glass beads.

"No! I'm handling this." I said. "So suppose they go along with your offer? I'm not going along with it. So they drop me, but I now know the plan." I smiled at him. "The kite's insured. The kite vanishes. Someone talking on the telephone to the insurance people could start a lot of trouble for you. We want three and a half, Kendrick."

He stared at me for a long moment, then nodded.

"You're quite a business man, cheri. Suppose we settle this sordid haggling for three million? I'll be robbing myself, but I will settle for three."

I looked at Bernie.

"We don't want to rob him, do we? So shall we settle for three?"

Bernie, looking dazed, nodded.

I looked at the other two. Erskine was gaping at me, his eyes goggling. Pam didn't look at me.

In less than ten minutes, I had made us all an extra million.

"Okay. . . three." I said.

Kendrick grimaced.

"Then that's all settled. If that's all, I must be running away."

"It's not all." I turned to Bernie. "How is the money to be paid?"

Bernie stiffened.

"Well . . . Claude is going to arrange for it to be paid into the Florida Bank here in my name and I share it out."

It was now my turn to gape at him.

"For God's sake! Three million suddenly paid into a local bank when we are all supposed to be dead?"

Sweat beads appeared on Bernie's face.

"I - I hadn't thought of that." He looked helplessly at me. "What do you suggest?"

I turned to Kendrick who was watching me, his little eyes granite hard.

"You pay half the money: one million and a half into the National Bank of Mexico under Olson's name: you pay that before we take off.

Then you pay the rest to the bank when we deliver.”

He shifted around on his chair, took out his handkerchief and then fanned his face.

“That could be arranged.”

“It has to be arranged. We don’t fly the kite out until Bernie gets a bank receipt for half the money.”

He lifted his fat shoulders. I could see in spite of his fixed smile he was hating me.

“All right, cheri. I’ll arrange that.”

A pause, then I said. “Now there’s another thing. We want to inspect the runway where we land the kite.”

That really threw him. He stiffened, his face flushed and his beady eyes turned to stone.

“The runway. . . what do you mean?”

“The runway.” I made my voice offensively patient. “We want to inspect it.”

“There’s no need. I’ve discussed this with Bernie.”

“So, now, discuss it with me. Where’s the runway?”

“A few miles from Merida.”

“Who built it?”

“My client.”

“What’s he know about making a runway?”

Kendrick shifted his orange wig, then put it on straight.

“There’s no problem. He knows what he is doing. He’s spent a lot of money constructing the runway. If he’s satisfied, so should you.”

“You think so? Do you imagine we’re going to risk a ten million dollar kite on a runway built by a gang of Mexicans? Do you think we’re crazy?” I leaned forward and glared at him. “What do you know about building a runway? We could crash the kite.” I turned to Bernie. “Do you remember the foul up we had when the Viets built a runway for us? It sagged and we crashed. Remember?”

This was a lie, but Bernie caught on quickly.

“That’s right.”

I turned back to Kendrick.

“These three are tied up, working for Essex. I’m foot loose. I’ll check the runway. . . you fix it.”

Kendrick licked his lips.

“I’ll talk to my client. He may not agree.”

“Then that’s too bad. We don’t fly the kite in until I’ve checked the runway.”

“I’ll see what can be arranged.” A pause, his eyes dwelling on me. “Is there any other little problem that’s bothering you, cheri?”

I grinned at him.

“No: my problems are your problems now.”

He got to his feet.

"Then I'll run away." He lifted his wig and bowed to Pam.

"Bye dears," and he moved around the table, then paused, looking at Bernie. "You've found a smart boy, Bernie . . . watch him, he could get too smart," and then he waddled away down the steps to his yellow and black Cadillac and was driven away.

I lit a cigarette and looked at Bernie.

"So what have we got?" I said. "We now have an extra million to cut up between us. We're now going to find out who is buying the kite. When I go out there, I'll find him. I've fixed at least half the money comes to us even if Fatso gyps us out of the other half and he could. How do you like it, Bernie?"

Olson smiled crookedly.

"Why else do you imagine I picked on you?"

But I could tell by his eyes that I had taken the lead out of his hands: I could see he now knew who was the better man.

I then looked at the other two.

"How do you like it?"

Erskine stared for a long moment at me, then he said, "I apologise Jack for being hostile. The way you handled it was marvellous. From now on, I cooperate. What you say goes with me. Hell! I never thought of any of this stuff you fed to him. You're right. We're just goddamn amateurs."

"Fine." I shifted my eyes to Pam. "And you? You happy?"

She didn't even look at me. She just shrugged.

"Baby! I'm talking to you . . . are you happy?"

"Let's leave her out of it" Bernie said sharply.

"Oh, no!" I leaned forward. "She's part of the team. I want to hear her angle."

She looked at me, her eyes snapping.

"You did very well. You are the miracle boy. Is that what you want to hear?"

I swung around and looked at Bernie.

"Do we need her?"

Olson rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth.

"Pam and I are together and we go together."

"Fine. So . . . you take care of her. From where I'm sitting I have you and Harry. You take care of her . . . right?"

Pam got to her feet.

"I'm going, Bernie. I can't stomach this . . . this . . ." She stopped as Erskine grabbed her wrist and jerked her down on her chair again. Bernie half started up as Erskine said quietly to her. "Cut it out, Pam!"

She looked at him and I knew he had screwed her as I had screwed her and looking at Bernie's white, drawn face, I knew he knew it too.

She stared at Erskine, then lifted her hands helplessly.

"I'm sorry."

There was a long pause, then I said, "No more drama for the moment?"

No one said anything.

"So . . . here's another thing. While we're talking we may as well talk this out."

"Sure," Erskine said. "Let's have another drink." He snapped his fingers and the girl appeared. He ordered another round of drinks. It was a good idea. The atmosphere grew cooler while we waited.

"You got something else on your mind Jack?" Erskine asked after the girl had delivered the drinks and had gone away.

"The idea is that when we have radio silence, we have accepted the fact that we are dead people. We have all gone into the sea," I said. "Have you thought what that means? I go along with the idea. We can't take the risk of coming back to the U.S. of A. We have to stay in Mexico, but the thing is we have to act as dead people."

"I told you that," Bernie said impatiently. "Life in Mexico could work out for all of us, but if it didn't, with all this money, we could get lost in South America or even Europe."

"You're not catching, Bernie," I said. "Kendrick and his client will also know we have to be dead people to get away with this. Have a think about it."

Bernie stared at me, his eyes puzzled. He looked at Erskine who was also staring at me.

"Still doesn't jell?" I said. "You still don't catch!"

"Just what are you talking about?" Erskine demanded, his voice angry.

"Oh, you babes in the wood! Hasn't it entered your innocent minds that when we land the kite, how convenient it would be for Kendrick and his client for us to be met by a bunch of Mexican thugs who would slit our throats, bury us in the jungle, and Kendrick and his client pick up a ten million dollar kite without paying us for our services?"

Erskine shoved back his chair, his expression startled.

"I never thought of that!"

"Kendrick would never do a thing like that," Bernie said feebly, but he looked sick.

"No? Anyone smart and Fatso is smart, wouldn't bother about four lives if he could net six million dollars." I said. "We could be walking into a trap. I'm not saying we will, but we could."

"You're right," Erskine said. "Goddamn it! It could happen!"

"You're a trusting bunch, aren't you?" I said. "If ever you say your prayers, thank the Lord you picked on me to handle this."

"So what do we do?" Erskine asked.

"We use our brains. We have two months to get this operation fixed. I'll go out there and find out who is handling the deal, then we all concentrate on the important thing . . . how we remain dead and yet still keep alive."

I was just dropping off to sleep when I heard a tapping on my cabin door. I snapped on the bedside lamp and swung myself out of bed, looking at my strap watch. The time was 00.15.

Again the tap came on the door.

I crossed the living room and opened up. Harry Erskine came in and I shut the door.

"I want to talk to you," he said.

The only light came from my bedroom. He loomed before me: big, broad, like the shadow of a tree.

"I was just going to sleep."

"Never mind about sleep." He moved further into the cabin and dropped into a chair. "Listen, Jack, I'm sorry I got off on the wrong foot with you. I thought you were a phoney, blown up by Bernie, but when I saw you handle that greaseball, I knew you were my man. I want to talk to you about Bernie."

I sat down near him and reached for a pack of cigarettes.

I lit one and tossed the pack to him. He lit up and we regarded each other.

"So talk about Bernie," I said.

"He's going downhill so fast he could be on a toboggan. This goddamn bitch has fixed him." He flicked ash on the floor. "He has her continually on his mind. I don't have to tell you, she screws around and this is poison to him, but he can't part with her. It's affecting his mind." He leaned forward. "At the speed he's failing, he can't last more than three or four months as a pilot. I know. I work with him. He's so goddamn absent minded, he'll start to take the kite off the floor before going through the flight routine. Three times recently I've stopped him and he has given me an odd blank look and then started the routine. He's got this bug in his mind that he must have money to start an air taxi service in Mexico. The way he's sliding he couldn't handle one taxi, let alone a fleet. Now look Jack, don't think I've got anything against Bernie. We've worked together for nine months. At first, I admired him. He was a fine pilot, but this woman has really fixed him. If you knew the number of times I've averted a certain crash you wouldn't believe it. His mind just isn't on flying."

I listened to this with growing dismay.

"Well, for God's sake!"

"Yeah. . . and what's he going to do with the new kite? We're both going up to the Condor's works at the end of the month for a course of

instruction. As he is now, the test pilots will murder him. Essex will get a report that will give Bernie the gate in seconds.”

“I can’t believe this! Bernie can handle anything with wings! He’s the finest pilot I’ve ever worked for!”

“He was . . . that I grant you, but not now. He just doesn’t concentrate and you know a pilot damn well has to concentrate.”

He crushed his cigarette, then went on, “Suppose you talk to him? Suppose you try to persuade him to get rid of Pam? I can’t think of any other solution. Get rid of her and he might settle down again. What do you think?”

I shied away from this suggestion. I couldn’t imagine talking to Bernie about his woman.

“Why don’t you talk to him?”

Erskine shook his head.

“He might start thinking I was after his job. You could do it. I can’t.”

I thought for a long moment, then asked, “if he got the heave, would you get his job?”

“No I’m too young. Essex would find an older man . . . no problem. Look, Jack, if we’re going to swing this operation, you either talk to Bernie and make him see sense or the operation is a non-starter.”

“You’re sure Pam is the trouble?”

“I know it.”

Again I paused to think. The idea of losing three million dollars because a woman had hot pants stuck in my maw.

“Maybe it would be better if I talked to her.”

Erskine grimaced.

“She’s tricky.”

“That’s right.” I sat back, my mind racing. “Look, I’ll think about it. Okay. Harry, thanks for wising me up.” I didn’t want to talk anymore this night. I now had enough to think about as it was “I’ll see what I can do.”

“You think this operation will jell?”

“I don’t know. All I know is if you want to pick up three million dollars, you have to expect a lot of headaches” I stood up.

“You really believe these Mexicans could knock us of when we land the kite?” he asked as he climbed to his feet.

“Ask yourself. We haven’t landed yet: let’s take one problem at a time.”

“Yeah.” He brushed his hand over his close cut hair. “Well, I’m leaving it up to you. I’m in cabin 15 if you want me.”

“Where’s Pam’s cabin?”

“No 23: the last in the row.”

I let him out, then moved around the living room, turning over in

my mind what he had told me, then I went into my bedroom, slid out of my pyjamas, put on a shirt and slacks, shoved my feet into sandals and left my cabin.

I walked silently down the row of cabins to the last one. I checked that it was No. 23, then rapped on the door.

A light was showing around the curtains. After a pause, Pam said "Who is it?"

"Your boyfriend."

She opened the door and I pushed by her, closing the door behind me.

She had on a flimsy wrap and her feet were bare.

"You! What do you want?" Her voice was shrill.

"A talk about Bernie." I moved to a lounging chair and sat down.

"I'm not talking to you about Bernie! Get out!"

"Take it easy . . . this is business. We four stand to pick up three million dollars, but it could come unstuck because of you."

She glared at me.

"Because of me? What do you mean?"

"If you don't know, you are dumber than I think you are, but I'll spell it out to you. Because you are screwing around with anything in trousers, Bernie is flipping his lid. He's not concentrating and I'll tell you, baby, just in case you don't know a pilot has to concentrate. Because you sleep around and imagine Bernie goes along with it, you have demoralised him."

"That's a lie!" She clenched her fists. "Bernie told me . . ."

"Oh, wrap up! Bernie's soft about you. To hold onto you, he'd tell you anything. Now, listen to me. We're in this thing for three million dollars. I'm not going along with a bitch like you who thinks she has to have it and by having it, ruins a great pilot. Hear me?" I wasn't shouting; I was talking quietly. "So tomorrow you see him and you tell him that from now on you stay with him and there's going to be no more screwing and you'll convince him."

"Who the hell do you think you are, talking this way to me?" she yelled at me. "Bernie and I . . ."

"Wrap up! This is an ultimatum, baby. You either keep your legs crossed from now on until this operation is over or you get out of here. You convince him or you're out?"

"Yes? And who's going to put me out?"

I smiled at her.

"Baby, I have you over a barrel. It'd be too easy. I have only to tell Mrs. Essex that you are acting like a whore for you to get tossed of the airport. I don't want to do it. but I will if you don't convince Bernie that from now on, you're going to behave."

"You bastard!"

I got to my feet.

“That’s the deal. You convince him or you’re out.”

I left her.

Back in my bed, I thought about it all. I couldn’t see how I could have improved on what I had said: it either worked or three million dollars went up in smoke.

Eventually, I fell asleep to be awakened by the sound of the telephone bell. I looked at my watch. The time was 10.24.

The sun was coming through the drawn curtains. I had slept better than I had expected.

I went into the living room and picked up the receiver.

“Jack, cheri.”

I knew who was calling.

“That’s me.”

“I’ve talked to my client. You can inspect the runway. He tells me it isn’t necessary, but if you’re nervous about it you can inspect it.”

“I’m nervous about it.”

“Yes. Well, go to the Continental hotel at Merida. I have arranged for you to be picked up around 12.30 on the morning of the 4th. That will give you three days to get organised. Will that suit you?”

“Fine.”

“Bye now, cheri,” and he hung up.

I showered and shaved, then taking the Alfa, I drove into Paradise City. I spent the whole day there, taking in the sights, the sun and thinking about this operation. I had three good opportunities to pick up a dolly, but I resisted that. There was too much to think about without getting into complications with one of these little pushovers.

I returned to the airport just after 19.00 and went to cabin 15. With a cordless shaver in his hand. Erskine opened the door.

“Hi!” He grinned at me. “You’re a goddamn miracle worker!”

He stood aside so I could move in and then shut the door. “Did you swing something! Bernie’s a different man!”

I felt suddenly relaxed.

“You think it worked?”

“It’s worked. Look, Jack, I have a heavy date and I’m late already. Go, talk to Bernie. He’s in his cabin: No. 19. See for yourself.”

“I’ll do that,” and leaving him I went along to No. 19.

Erskine was right. As soon as Bernie opened the door, I could see the change in him. It was as if the cloud that had been obscuring him had lifted. He stood upright and there was that grin again.

“Hi! Jack! Come on in. Have a drink?”

As I started into the cabin. I paused, seeing Pam sitting there.

“I don’t want to barge in.”

I looked at her and she looked at me, then she smiled.

"Come on in: you don't have to be shy." She leaned back.

"We have got it all straightened out . . . haven't we, Bernie?"

"Yes." Bernie started to mix drinks. "Pam told me about last night. You were right Jack. She needed to be told."

"Okay. . . so let's forget it. Let's talk business."

"Just a moment." Bernie gave me a whisky on the rocks.

"I want to say thank you and so does Pam."

I couldn't believe any of this, but again looking at Pam, I saw she was smiling and completely relaxed.

"Let's skip it. It's all water under a bridge. Man! What dialogue" I waved my drink at her. "Here's to you and I mean it."

We all drank. There was a pause, then she said. "You came at the right time Jack."

I sat down.

"As I said, let's skip it." I turned to Bernie. "Kendrick has given me the green light to inspect the runway. I leave on the third."

"You're certainly handling this," he said. "You know I would never have thought of checking the runway."

"I'm sure it's okay, but it just might give me the chance of finding out who Kendrick's client is."

"Is that so important?" "

"Could be. I don't like Kendrick. He could gyp us. If we know who his client is, we would be in the position to gyp him."

"Kendrick won't gyp us."

"Let's hope not, but I'll be happier if I know who his client is."

"Well, all right. How are you for money Jack?"

"I could do with three hundred dollars. I won't be away more than a couple of days, and there's the flight fare to Merida to take care of."

He went to a drawer and gave me five hundred dollars.

As I put the money in my pocket, I said, "There's another thing: have you a gun, Bernie?"

He looked startled.

"You don't need a gun Jack. What do you mean?"

"We're playing with dynamite. Kendrick now hates me like smallpox. I could just run into an accident when inspecting the runway. With me out of the way, his life would become a lot easier."

"You're not serious?"

"If you have a gun, I want it."

He hesitated, then went into his bedroom and returned with a .38 automatic and a box of shells. Silently, he handed them to me.

"Thanks," I said.

There was an awkward pause, then he said, "Tomorrow I'm flying Essex to L.A. Harry and I won't be back until Saturday night."

My eyes shifted to Pam and then away from her.

"So suppose we four meet at the cafe-bar on Sunday at 18.00?" I said. "I'll be back from Merida and could have some information."

He nodded.

"I'll tell Harry."

"We'll leave Kendrick out this time."

Again he nodded.

"One more thing Bernie. If I don't show up on Sunday, forget this operation. Don't go through with it: it won't be safe."

While he was staring uneasily at me, I left the cabin.

After a shower and a shave, I found the time was only 20.22. I could hear the sound of T.V. coming from Tim's cabin.

I knocked on his door.

"Want to spend some of Mr. Essex's money tonight, Tim?"

I asked when he opened the door.

"Sure. Where do we go?"

"On the town."

It was while I was driving the Alfa towards Paradise City that I said casually, "How's the runway shaping?"

"Fine," O'Brien said. "No problem. It'll be ready in three weeks: going like a bomb."

"I hear there's a similar runway being built outside Merida. You wouldn't know about that?"

"Merida? Sure." O'Brien chuckled. "Now that was a real sonofabitch to build, but it's finished now. My sidekick Bill O'Cassidy is putting the finishing touches to it. I was talking to him on the phone only last night. I wanted his advice about a rock problem I've run into. Bill is about the best man in this game. He told me he can't wait to get out of Yucatan. He's had a bellyful."

"But the runway is finished?"

"Oh, sure."

"O'Cassidy? I knew a Frank O'Cassidy. Would that be a relation?"

"Could be. I know Bill had a brother serving in Vietnam His name was Sean. He was killed out there in the 6th battalion, parachute. He won the Silver Star."

"Not the same man."

I pulled up outside the Casino.

"Let's eat."

Later, after a top class meal, I said casually, "Your pal O'Cassidy. Would he be staying at the Continental hotel?"

O'Brien had had a lot to drink and thought I was just making conversation.

"He's at the Chalco."

Just then two dolly birds moved up to us and asked if we would like some fun.

I said some other time and they smiled and went away, waving their hips at us. I signalled to the waiter, signed for the meal and pushed back my chair.

“How about bed. Tim? You have a hard day’s work tomorrow.”

“Damn fine meal.” Tim got to his feet. “Man! Did you strike it good!”

My mind was pretty active on the way back to the airport.

I decided I would leave for Merida the following morning. After I had left Tim at his cabin, I called the Florida Airlines and booked a flight to Merida, leaving Paradise City at 10.27.

I would be a day’s jump ahead of Kendrick and I had a feeling any jump ahead of that fat queer was a move in my favour.

A battered, rusty Chevy rushed me from the Merida airport to the Chalco hotel. The driver looked as if he should still be at school: his blue-black hair reached to the collar of his dirty white shirt and he continually leaned out of the car window to curse other drivers.

The heat was something and it was raining fit to drown a duck. I sat back on broken springs and sweated, and every now and then, shut my eyes as a crash seemed certain, but the boy finally got me to the hotel in one piece.

I paid him off in Mexican money I had collected at the airport and dashed through the rain into the hotel.

It was down a narrow side street, painted white and the lobby was clean with cactus plants, bamboo chairs and a tiny fountain that made a soft sound which encouraged a coolness that didn't exist.

I went up to the reception desk where an old fat Mexican sat picking his teeth with a splinter of wood "A room for the night with a shower." I said.

He shoved a tattered register towards me and a police card.

I went through the motions, then a tiny, dirty boy appeared to take my bag.

"Mr. O'Cassidy in?" I asked.

The old man showed slight interest. He said something in Spanish.

"Mr. O'Cassidy," I repeated in a slightly louder voice.

The little boy said, "He in bar." And he pointed. I followed the direction of his dirty finger and saw a door. I gave the kid the equivalent of a half dollar and told him to take my bag up to my room. The kid's eyes nearly fell out of his head. The old man leaned forward and stared first at the money in the kid's dirty hand and then at the kid. I doubted if the kid would stick with the money. I left them and entered the tiny bar where a radio played soft music, where a fat girl with long black plaits supported herself on the bar and where, at the far end of the bar, was a man, hidden by the Herald Tribune.

"Scotch on the rocks," I said, moving down to the middle of the bar.

At the sound of my voice, the man lowered the newspaper and regarded me. I waited until the girl had given me the drink, then looked at him.

He was a man of around forty-five, big with reddish, close-cropped hair, a blunt, heavily tanned face and steady green eyes.

He was the same ilk as Tim O'Brien: a man you couldn't help but like.

I raised my glass and said, "Hi!"

His wide Irish smile was warming.

"Hi, yourself. You just moved in?"

I wandered down the bar close to him.

"Jack Crane. May I buy you a drink?"

"Thanks." He nodded to the girl who busied herself with a Scotch and soda. "Bill O'Cassidy."

He offered his hand and I shook it.

"That's luck. Tim O'Brien told me to look out for you."

He lifted his eyebrows.

"You know Tim?"

"Know him? We were out on the town last night."

"O'Cassidy glanced at the fat girl as she brought him his drink then picking it up. he jerked his head to a table away from the bar and we went over there.

"That babe never stops listening," he said as we sat down "How's Tim?"

"Fine. He's working like hell on this runway. You know about that, don't you?"

"Yeah. He's in trouble with rocks." O'Cassidy grinned. "He doesn't know when he is well off; I've had swamps to cope with."

"Tim was telling me."

"Well, that's all behind me now. I'm leaving tomorrow. Phew! I can't wait to get out of this god-forsaken country!"

"Certainly hot and this rain!"

"This is the beginning of the wet season. The sonofabitch will rain non-stop now for a couple of months. Just got the job finished in time."

"O'Cassidy?" I said idly. "No relation to Sean O'Cassidy who won the Silver Star?"

He sat upright.

"My kid brother! You knew him?"

"I was out there. I was with the bombers. I met him once. 6th Parachute . . . right?"

"For Pete's sake!" He leaned forward, grabbed my hand and shook it. "Hell of a small world! You met Sean?"

"That's it. We had a drink together. I had no idea he would win the Silver Star. We just got drunk together."

He sat back and beamed at me.

"A great little guy."

"He certainly was."

"What did you say your name was?"

"Jack Crane."

"Okay, Jack, you and me are going out on the town. It's my last night here. We eat, we get goddamn drunk, but not too drunk and we

get us a couple of girls . . . how's about it?"

I grinned at him

"Fine with me."

"Nothing gets moving in this city until around 22.00." He looked at his strap watch. "It's now only 20.18. I'll take a shower and suppose we meet here at 21.45. . . okay?"

"Sure."

We collected our keys at the desk. The old Mexican regarded us without interest. My room was five doors along the corridor from O'Cassidy's room. We parted. I found my bag on the bed. In spite of the window being open, the room was stiflingly hot. I stared down into the street, watching the rain making puddles, then I unpacked, dug out another shirt and another pair of slacks and lay on the bed.

The noise of the roaring traffic and the clanging of the church bells made a nap impossible so I did some thinking.

Later I stripped of and took a shower, changed, but it didn't help much. Life in Merida was like living in a sauna.

I went down to the bar and asked the girl with the plaits for a whisky on the rocks. At least there was a fan in the bar. I read through the Herald Tribune and then O'Cassidy joined me.

"That's the last drink you buy yourself tonight," he said.

"Come on . . . let's go. I've got a car outside."

We ran through the rain to a Buick. By the time we had scrambled in we were both pretty wet, but the heat dried us before O'Cassidy parked outside a restaurant. We ran from the car and ducked out of the rain into the entrance lobby.

A fat, grinning Mexican in a white coat shook hands with O'Cassidy and then led us into a dimly-lit room, but air-conditioned, to a table in the fat corner. There were about thirty tables dotted around, occupied by sleek looking Mexicans and sleeker looking girls.

"I've been in this city now for nine months and I always eat here nights," O'Cassidy said as he sat down. "The food's fine."

He waved to a dark, sulky looking beauty who was at the bar and who lifted a tired hand and weary eyebrows. He shook his head, then turning to me: "The dolls here are very willing, but let's eat first. You like Mexican food?"

"So long as it's not too hot."

We had tamales which were hot but very good, followed by Mole de Guajolote: a fricassee of turkey seasoned with tomatoes, sesame seeds and covered with a thick chocolate sauce.

The sauce startled me until I tried the dish to find it excellent.

After we had got through the Mole and had talked of Vietnam and O'Cassidy's brother, I felt O'Cassidy was relaxed enough for me to get to business.

"Can I ask you about this runway you've built Bill?" I asked cautiously.

"Why, sure. You interested in runways?"

"I'm an aero-engineer and anything to do with flying interests me."

"Is that right? Well, this goddamn runway was the worst I've ever had to build so far: Right in the middle of the jungle: trees, rocks, swamps, snakes . . . you name it, it was there."

"Yet you built it."

He grinned.

"When I get paid to do a job, I do it, but no kidding there were times when I nearly packed it in. The crew I had to work for me drove me nuts. They had an I.Q. a child of four would be ashamed of. I had around a thousand of them and they did as much work in a day as twenty good Irishmen would do. Six of the jerks during the nine months got themselves killed either by snakes or walking into blasting or a tree falling on them."

"But you built it."

He nodded, leaning back in big chair, a look of pride on his face.

"That's what I did."

"I remember in Vietnam we had to build a runway fast with coolie labour," I lied. "The first bomber to touch down smashed it up and the kite was a write-off."

"That's not going to happen to my runway. I guarantee a 747 could land on it and when I guarantee something, it stays guaranteed . . ."

Then came the sixty-four thousand dollar question.

Casually, I said, "Who the hell wants a runway slap in the middle of a jungle?"

"You get these nuts." O'Cassidy shrugged. "The one thing I've learned in my racket is not to ask questions. I get propositioned: I get paid. I do the job and then I move on. I'm going to Rio tomorrow to extend a runway for a Flying Club: that'll be an easy one. How about a brandy and coffee?"

"Why not?"

He gave the order then we lit cigarettes.

After a moment of hesitation, I said, "It's important to me Bill, to know who financed your runway."

He stared at me, his green eyes probing.

"Important? Why?"

I flicked ash on the floor.

"I've got myself mixed up in something I can't talk about," I said. "It's to do with your runway. I smell trouble and I need as much information as I can get."

The coffee and two brandies arrived.

He put sugar in his coffee, stirred and I could see he was thinking. I

didn't hurry him. Suddenly, as if he had made up his mind, he shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Okay Jack, because you're a friend of Tim's and you've met my kid brother and because I'm pulling out of here and frankly, I don't give a damn now I've got my money. I'll give you my ideas about this runway, but they're ideas not facts . . . understand?"

I nodded.

He paused to look around as if to make certain no one was paying us any attention, then leaning forward and lowering his voice, he went on, "It's on the cards there is going to be a revolution here. Listening to the jerks who work for me I get the idea something's on the boil. That's my guess. I could be wrong, but I don't think so, that's why I'm damned glad to be getting out tomorrow." He sipped his brandy, then went on, "The man financing the runway is Benito Orzoco. He's a nutter Jack. A real nutter but he is a big shot around here. He leads the left wing extremists and so I hear is a blood brother of Castro of Cuba. Orzoco considers himself a second Juan Alvarez who was the first President of the Republic way back in 1855. Orzoco is stinking rich. Anything he wants he has and I mean anything. With this runway, plus a big kite, he could fly men and arms in and keep them hidden in the jungle until the green light goes up." He finished his coffee. "Look, Jack, I don't know a thing for certain. I'm telling you what I think could be the reason for building the runway. Maybe it's something else, but I don't think so. I'm of tomorrow and couldn't care less . . . that help you?"

"Sure does. Did you ever meet Orzoco?"

"I'll say. He came to inspect the runway every month."

O'Cassidy's nose wrinkled. "I'd rather touch a black mamba than him."

"Give me a better idea than that."

O'Cassidy blew out his cheeks.

"He's a nutter. I'm sure of that. He's short, powerfully built and a dresser. He has snake's eyes. First glance he's like any other rich dago, but he has something plus. He's crazy in the head. Every now and then, it shows. He is rich and has power but wants more power. He's as deadly as generalised cancer."

"Sounds nice," I said soberly.

O'Cassidy sipped his brandy.

"I don't know what your racket is Jack, and I don't want to know, but take a tip from me . . . watch out."

Two dolly birds descended on us and we began drinking in earnest. Later, they took us back to their pad. They gave out. Finally, we got back to our hotel around 03.40.

"Some night, huh?" O'Cassidy said as he shook hands. "So long

Jack. I'm off early."

"Some night."

I wasn't to see him again.

I went along to my room, fell into bed and went out like a blown flame.

Around midday I checked out of the Chalco and took a taxi in the pouring rain across to the Continental hotel. This was one of the top hotels in Merida and the lobby was crammed with American tourists, wrapped in plastic macs and making a noise like a disturbed parrot house.

I edged my way to the reception desk and waited while an elderly American quarrelled with a bored-faced clerk about his check. Finally, the argument was settled and the clerk turned to me.

"Checking in. Jack Crane." I said.

He stiffened to attention.

"Happy to have you with us Mr. Crane. Yes . . . room 500. Top floor with a view. If there's anything you need, please ask. We are at your service, Mr. Crane."

A boy in buttons appeared and took my bag and the key the clerk gave him. He led me around the tourists to the elevator and up to the fifth floor.

Unlocking a door opposite the elevator, he bowed me into a big sitting room, led me into a big bedroom with a king's size bed, then placing my bag, he showed me the ornate bathroom, bowed, accepted the tip I gave him, bowed again and removed himself.

I looked around, wondering how much this setup was going to cost. "Then I moved into the sitting room and through the open French windows onto the covered terrace. The humid heat was making me sweat again.

A man leaned on the terrace rail, looking down at the slow moving traffic. He turned as I came out onto the terrace.

He was tall, thin, with thick longish jet black hair, around forty years of age, his eyes hidden behind black sun goggles: a long thin nose, an almost lipless mouth, a cleft chin. He was wearing a white suit that looked as if it had just come back from the cleaners, a yellow shirt and a blood red tie.

"Mr. Crane?" He advanced towards me, smiling.

"That's right." I took his offered hand, dry and hard, and shook it.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Juan Aulestria, but call me Juan . . . it is easier."

I got my hand back from his grip and waited.

"Welcome to Yucatan, Mr. Crane," he went on. "I hope you will be comfortable here. I'm sure you would like a drink."

I wasn't going to let this smoothie be sure of anything as far as I was

concerned.

“No, thanks: I’m easy. Just who are you?”

This fazed him for a brief second. The smile slipped, but it came quickly again into position.

“Ah . . . yes.” He turned and stared at the rain swollen clouds. “Such a pity. Sad for the tourists. If you had come two days ago you would have seen this city as it should be seen. Suppose we sit down?” He moved to a lounging chair and sank into it. “You ask who I am, Mr. Crane.” He flicked a speck of dust from his immaculate white sleeve. “I have to do with the runway that has just been built. I am told you want to inspect it.”

I stood over him

“That’s what I want to do.”

He nodded, looking up at me.

“But do sit down: are you sure you wouldn’t like a drink?”

“I like standing and I don’t want a drink.” I paused to light a cigarette. “I represent the people who are bringing you the plane. This plane costs ten million dollars. My people want to deliver it in one piece and unless I’m sure the runway is right, we don’t deliver.”

He hated sitting there looking up at me so he got casually to his feet.

“Our contact explained this to me. This shows efficiency, Mr. Crane, but I assure you the runway is perfect. However. . .” He waved his thin hands, “You are the expert. You shall see it and decide for yourself.”

I was liking him as you would a big spider in your bath.

“When do we go?”

“Would this afternoon suit you?”

“Fine.”

“Then at three I will have a car here for you. We will go by helicopter. We can survey the ground, then we will land and you can inspect it. I’m afraid you will get rather wet but I have ordered plastics for you.”

“Thank you.”

“I have also arranged for you to lunch up here. Would that please you?”

“Thank you.”

He started towards the living room.

“So glad. Since you have already tasted our great national dish of Mole de Guapalote, may I suggest you try our Chile Jalapeno: quite excellent.” He turned and smiled at me.

Keeping my face wooden, I said. “I’ll settle for a steak.”

“Anything: then at 15.00. Mr. Crane.”

We shook hands and he let himself out of the room as silently and

as smoothly as a snake.

I closed the French windows and turned on the air conditioner. Then I went to the refrigerator and poured myself a stiff whisky and soda.

So he knew I had met O'Cassidy. Obviously he wasn't making any secret about it by telling me what I had eaten last night. I sat down and did some thinking.

After a while a tap came on the door and a little Mexican in white pushed a trolley towards me. Another little Mexican came behind him with a suitcase in his hand. He set it down as his companion took of the covers of my meal. They bowed themselves out.

The steak was fair. I ate it, left the carafe of red wine, decided against the mangoes, lit a cigarette and inspected the suitcase. It contained a short plastic coat, plastic trousers, rubber boots and a plastic hood.

I lay on the bed, smoking until 14.50, then I got up, took Bernie's .38 from my suitcase. I checked it, loaded it and stuck it in my hip pocket.

As the nearby church clock struck three, I went down to the lobby.

The reception clerk came around his desk, smiling. "There's a car waiting for you, Mr. Crane." He led the way and handed me over to the doorman who had an open umbrella. The doorman conducted me to a sleek Cadillac, driven by a blank-faced Mexican in a smart blue uniform.

As soon as I was seated in the rear of the car, the chauffeur took off; He was a skillful, fast driver and in spite of the thick traffic, he got me to the airport in ten minutes. He by-passed the reception and departure building, drove around the back and pulled up beside a helicopter. He was out of the car with a big umbrella before I could move. I got out of the car, carrying the plastic gear and got into the helicopter without getting more than a sprinkle from the pouring rain.

Aulestria occupied one of the seats just behind the pilot.

He smiled his snake's smile as I settled "Did you have a good lunch, Mr. Crane?"

"Fine, thank you."

The blades started to swing and in a few moments we flew away over the city.

Aulestria made small talk, pointing out the Palace of the State Government, the Cathedral and the National University.

Leaving the city and heading south, I looked down at the haciendas and the many sisal factories. The rocky countryside slowly changed to dense forest land and finally to jungle.

After an hour of flying, Aulestria said, "We are now approaching the runway. Mr. Crane."

I looked ahead but could see nothing but tree tops and jungle.

"It's well hidden."

"Yes: very well hidden." His voice was smug.

Then I saw it: an engineering feat de luxe: A solid ribbon of tarmac that stretched for at least two miles, bordered by the jungle on either side, painted a dullish green and unless you were hunting for it, you would never spot it.

"Some job!" I said, leaning forward as the chopper flew the length of it, circled and came back again.

"We think it is satisfactory," Aulestria said. "It is good that you approve."

"Tell him to fly back a mile, then come in. I want to see the approach."

Aulestria spoke to the pilot.

Now I was ready and as we came in again, I judged how Bernie would come in I decided it presented no problem to a pilot of Bernie's experience.

"Fine. Now let's look at the control tower."

We landed by the side of the tower and I put on my plastic coat. It was still pouring with rain.

Aulestria led me from the chopper, up steps and into the tower. I spent over an hour checking the instruments, the radar and all the gimmicks needed to bring in a kite. I couldn't fault anything.

What bothered me was the personnel in charge of the control tower. They all looked like bandits right out of a Western movie: real thugs who watched me with snake's eyes and who wore .45 revolvers on their hips.

"Do you want to walk the runway, Mr. Crane or did Mr. O'Cassidy convince you that he has built something to last?"

Aulestria asked.

"I won't walk it."

"Then I may take you back to your hotel?"

"That's it."

He led the way into a small air-conditioned office.

"Shall we talk?" He sat down behind the desk and waved me to a chair. "You are satisfied?"

"Yes. We can bring the kite in."

"Good." He stared at me, his eyes hidden behind the goggles. "Now, Mr. Crane, let us be practicable. This plane is highly sophisticated. We have three pilots. Naturally, they will have to be trained to handle the plane. I take it that your pilots will train them?"

"That's for them to decide."

"It would be no use for us to accept the plane unless our people could fly it. I was under the impression our contact had arranged for

this?"

"He said nothing to us about it."

"Would you check, then, Mr. Crane? My men must be trained by your people or the deal's off."

"I'll check. How good are your pilots?"

"Excellent. One of them has been flying a 747."

"Then I see no problem."

"Good." He got to his feet. "There's a flight back to Paradise City in three hours. The sooner we get this arranged the better. When will the plane be delivered?"

"In two months; could be less."

"Send me a cable: just the date and time of expected arrival. That's all that will be necessary."

"I'll do that."

As he moved to the door, he paused.

"Mr. Crane, you haven't asked any questions as to why we need this aircraft and I like that. I am aware that O'Cassidy has talked to you and perhaps he has given you his views. Dismiss anything he has told you from your mind. There should be no talk: is that understood?"

Keeping my face wooden, I said. "That's okay with me."

"I hope it is Mr. Crane," then he led me through the rain to the helicopter.

Because of what is known as a technical hitch, my flight back to Paradise City was delayed for two hours. I didn't reach the City until 20.25. I collected the Alfa I had left in the airport garage, then drove down to the waterfront. I decided not to return to my cabin this night. I didn't want to run into Pam while Bernie was away. I parked the Alfa and booked in at a modest hotel.

After a quick shower. I wandered out to find a meal. I picked on a small, but smart looking seafood restaurant, ordered curried prawns, then read a newspaper while I waited. I had just finished the prawns and was waiting for coffee when Mrs. Victoria Essex, accompanied by Wes Jackson, came in.

She saw me at once and smiled. Jackson also went through the grimace he called a smile. She started towards me so I stood up.

She looked marvellous in a simple white dress that must have cost the earth and there was that look in the big violet eyes that immediately turned me on.

"Why, Mr. Crane, I thought I had lost you." she said. "Where have you been?"

"Around and about," I said. "Glad to see you're no worse for your fall."

"I'm fine now." She was staring at me, then she turned around and looked at Jackson as if seeing him for the first time.

She flicked her fingers at him. "All right, Jackson, don't wait."

"Yes, Mrs. Essex," and he took his bulk out of the restaurant.

"May I join you?" she asked.

I pulled out a chair and she sat down. I went back to my chair.

The waiter came and she ordered coffee.

"I wanted you to ride with me this morning. They told me you had left." Her big violet eyes moved over me. "Had you?"

"That's right. I've been in Mexico for the past two days. An airline offered me a job. I thought I'd take a look at it."

"Mexico? You wouldn't want to live in that hole, would you?"

"I guess not."

"Then why did you go?"

"A free trip: I was getting bored here."

Her coffee arrived.

"God! Yes! I can understand that! I get bored too." She stirred her coffee. "My husband's jealous. When he goes on a trip. I either have to stay home or if I want to go out I have to have Jackson with me. He's supposed to be my chaperon and spy."

"Supposed to be?"

She smiled, sipped her coffee, then said, "He's more scared of me than my husband."

I finished my coffee.

"Have you anything to do tonight?" she asked.

"Not a thing."

"Have you a car?"

"Just across the road."

"I'll take you to a place. We can have fun."

"It's only a two-seater. There would be no room for Jackson."

She laughed.

"Don't worry about him. Let's go."

"Don't you want to eat?"

"I only eat when I'm bored." She looked directly at me and there was that thing again in her eyes. "I'm not bored now."

"Just a moment. I understand Mr. Essex is due back tonight."

"Are you scared of him?"

"I'm not scared of anyone, but I thought I'd mention it."

"I had a telex this afternoon. He's staying over at L.A and won't be back until tomorrow."

I got to my feet, paid the check and smiled at her.

"So what are we waiting for?"

We went out into the moonlit night. There was a Mercedes parked under a street light with Wes Jackson at the wheel. She went over to him spoke to him and he nodded. He drove away.

Together, we walked to the Alfa and she slid under the wheel.

"I'll take you," she said.

I got in beside her and she drove away from the waterfront: expert, fast driving, perfect control and I sat back and enjoyed being driven.

We got onto the hill road and we drove fast for three or four miles, then she turned up a dirt road and finally pulled up outside a knotty pine cabin.

"This is my retreat," she said, sliding out of the car, "where I exercise my hobbies."

As she was unlocking the door. I remembered what Bernie had said about Harry Erskine: Mrs. Essex dangled herself and he fell for it and then she cut him down to size That's her speciality: turning it on, making a guy think he's going to get into her bed, then telling him he isn't.

The set-up looked good, but she could just be dangling herself I decided to play it cool. She would have to make all the advances.

I followed her into a large, comfortably furnished room and I saw a big divan across by the picture window.

"Pretty nice," I said. "What are your bobbies?"

"I paint: I'm not bad." She walked over to a cocktail cabinet "A whisky?"

"Thanks."

She made two drinks, handed me one and dropped down into a lounging chair. On the arm of the chair was a number of buttons. She pressed one and then sipped her drink. Soft music came from concealed speakers.

"That's neat," I said and sat on the arm of another lounging chair. "What it is to be rich."

"Do you want to be rich?"

"Who doesn't?"

"It has its disadvantages."

"Such as?"

She shrugged.

"Oh, boredom. When you have everything, you also have boredom."

"You would know . . . I wouldn't, I said.

She set down her glass, smiled and stood up.

"Let's dance."

She looked very inviting as she stood there: too inviting.

I sat where I was, looking at her.

"Mrs. Essex" I said quietly, "I have some inside information about you and I don't want to take advantage of you. You should have some inside information about me."

Her smile slipped away and the violet eyes became hard.

"What do you mean?"

"I have been told you are a copper plated bitch. What you don't

know is I am a copper plated bastard. It's only fair for you to know this. You see, Mrs. Essex, although I think you are the most gorgeous woman I have ever seen, the most desirable, the sexiest, no matter how good you look, I don't tease. You either get out of the dress and get on the divan and give out or I get out. Is that plain enough for you?"

Her eyes opened wide.

"How dare you talk to me like that!"

"That's what I thought. Well. I'll be running along. See you," and I started towards the door.

She sprang at me grabbed my arm, swung me around and slapped my face.

"You devil!"

I caught her up, gave her a stinging slap on her bottom, then tossed her onto the divan.

"Get out of that dress" I said, standing over her, "or do you want me to tear it of?"

"You hurt me!"

"Okay, so I tear it off"

"No! I have to have something to go home in!"

I laughed.

"So go ahead and get out of it."

Her eyes glittering, her breasts heaving, she slid out of the dress.

I got to the cafe-bar twenty minutes before the others were due. I ordered a coke and sat in the shade on the veranda and waited.

While I waited, I thought about Mrs. Victoria Essex I knew she would be good, and that's what she was. She acted like a woman who had been sexually starved most of her life. But why go into details? When it was finally over, she had got of the divan, had taken a shower while I lay there feeling as if I had been hit by a truck.

She had dressed while I still lay there.

"Lock up," she said. "I have a car. Put the key under the mat," and she was gone.

I waited until I heard her car drive away, then I dressed, locked up put the key under the mat and drove back to the hotel.

Well, I told myself you have laid one of the richest women in the world: what happens next? Would she tell Wes Jackson to get rid of me or did she want another session? It was a matter of waiting and seeing.

Olson's Buick came down the sandy road and pulled up.

He, Pam and Erskine got out and joined me.

“Good trip?” I asked as the girl served cokes.

“The usual,” Bernie shrugged. “The boss got held up. We’ve only just got in.”

I didn’t tell him I knew this.

When the girl had gone, I said, “It looks all right. I’ve checked the runway. No problem. It’s raining like hell out there and the fly in could be tricky.”

I went on to give him a detailed description of my reception, how I had met O’Cassidy and what he had told me.

“I think he’s right: this is a political thing,” I concluded. “Not that it matters to us. The thing that does matter is to be sure Kendrick pays up. We don’t shift the kite until we get that bank receipt.”

“How do you react now about us getting knocked of once we deliver?” Erskine asked.

“I think if we do what we’re told and don’t make reasons for them to turn rough, we’ll be okay.” I had thought about this a lot. “You see, you two have to train their pilots. As we’ve delivered the kite the agreement is we get the full payment. So we’ll probably have to stay at the airfield for a couple of weeks while the pilots are being trained. It seems to me once we have done that, fulfilled all obligations, there is no reason for them to get rid of us. They can’t get their hands on the money once it has been paid into the bank so what’s the point in knocking us of?”

Erskine thought about this, then nodded.

“But. . .” I paused to look directly at Bernie, “Pam doesn’t fly with us.”

He stiffened, but before he could say anything, Pam snapped, “I’d like to see you stop me!”

I ignored her, looking directly at Bernie.

“The airfield is staffed with thugs, Bernie. There are no women there. With you two busy training their pilots, Pam could run into trouble. I’m not taking the responsibility of looking after her. That’s strictly out. If one of those greasers makes a pass at her, we could have the trouble I want to avoid. So she doesn’t come with us. She takes a flight to Merida and stays at a hotel and waits for us, but she doesn’t come with us on the flight. Can you see that?”

“Bernie!” Pam’s voice was shrill. “You’re not listening to this jerk, are you? I’m coming with you!”

“I guess I’d better think about this Jack,” Bernie said uneasily.

“There’s nothing to think about. She doesn’t fly with us. I’ve seen these thugs . . . you haven’t. The moment they set eyes on her, they’ll come after her and then we’ll have real trouble.”

“Makes sense.” Erskine said “Why look for trouble?”

Bernie hesitated, then reluctantly nodded.

“Yes. Okay, she doesn’t come with us.”

“And what am I supposed to do? Sit in some stinking hotel and wait? Suppose you three decide to ditch me! I’d look a mug. wouldn’t I?” Pam said viciously. “I’m coming with you!”

I shoved back my chair and stood up.

“Want a lift back?” I asked Erskine.

“Sure.”

“Bernie, this is your problem: she’s your woman. You fix it.”

I walked down the steps with Erskine at my side to the Alfa.

I was trying to make up my mind what I was going to do with myself on this Monday morning when the telephone bell rang. I was hoping the call would be from Mrs. Essex suggesting a ride, but it was Bernie.

"Hi! Jack! Look, I've had a call from Mr. Essex Something's cooking. Will you stick around? From what Jackson tells me the Condor is ahead of time. As soon as I get back, I'll drop in."

"I'll be here," I said and he hung up.

The time was 9.47. I was feeling a little limp. Tim and I had done a movie, then some heavy drinking the previous night.

I had got from him that the runway would be finished by the end of the week. He was in a merry mood as he was five weeks ahead of schedule. He told me he would get a big bonus for getting the job done so quickly.

I ordered breakfast and when I had eaten it, I turned on the T.V. and watched an old western. It passed a couple of hours, then I shaved, showered and dressed.

Bernie showed up around 13.00. He looked like a man with a load on his back. Shutting the door, he dropped into a chair.

While I was fixing him a drink I said, "Did you talk sense into Pam?"

"Yes." He took the drink. "You're right Jack. I hadn't thought of that angle. A woman out in the jungle could really foul up this operation." He drank, blew out his cheeks. "I had a time. God! Women!"

"What's cooking with Essex?" I wasn't interested in his domestic problems.

"I've got instructions to fly him to Paris tomorrow. The new kite is ready for delivery. So I drop him in Paris, fly back, sell the old kite, take delivery of the new one, go on the course and be ready to collect him from Kennedy when he returns. He flies back from Paris by Pan-Am."

"Is Mrs. Essex going with him?"

"Yes." He looked sharply at me. "Why the interest?"

"I want to know where everyone is. And Pam?"

"The airfield closes down for four weeks. Everyone except Harry, Jean and me go of on vacation. Pam is going to stay with her married sister until the green light goes up, then she flies to Merida and waits for us."

"So we have four weeks?"

"That's it. I've talked to Jackson about you. I've told him I need you

to handle the servicing of the Condor. So he talked to Mr. Essex and it's fixed. You're now on the payroll from today at thirty thousand. You'll have to see Macklin, the staff manager, who will sign you on and fix everything. Officially, we start work in four weeks' time, but while you and the rest of them are on vacation, you get paid."

"I like that." I paused, then went on, "Can you give me a date when you fly in the new kite?"

"October 3rd unless the tests don't jell."

This was September 4th.

"When we hijack this kite, Bernie, we need to be armed. I'm not taking any chances with these greasers. Each of us should have a machine pistol and at least one automatic rifle."

He stared uneasily at me.

"You really think there could be trouble?"

"I don't know, but I'm taking precautions. Where can we get them?"

"That's no problem. We have an armoury here and it's pretty comprehensive. All we have to do is to help ourselves."

"Fine. Now there's another thing, Bernie. We all have to have false passports. We all have to begin new lives. Do you think Kendrick can fix that?"

"Hell! I never thought of that. You're right." Bernie hesitated, then nodded. "If he can't, no one can."

"I'll see him today. I'll want passport photos of you all."

"No problem. We always carry spares. I'll get them for you."

"Then another thing. I've been thinking more about the pay out, Bernie. I suggested it should be paid in your name to the National Bank of Mexico. This was half-ass thinking. My new thinking is we form a company in Mexico. This is much the safer way. I'll fly down to Mexico City and fix it up. I thought of calling the company the Blue Ribbon Air Taxi service. Once the company's set up then Kendrick pays the money into the bank who will credit the company. What do you think?"

He blinked.

"You're way ahead of me Jack. That's fine. I like the Blue Ribbon Air Taxi Service." He smiled, looking happy for the first time. "You'll be needing more money, won't you?"

"I'll get it from Kendrick. Get me the photos and leave the rest to me."

"Okay."

"One more thing. How is the three million to be shared."

He looked vague.

"I haven't really thought about it."

"Well, I have. You dreamed up the idea: so you get a million. I handle your idea so I get a million and a quarter. Harry gets three

quarters. That's the way I see it."

He moved uneasily.

"You've forgotten Pam."

"She's your woman, Bernie. You take care of her. She's not in the operation."

He hesitated, then shrugged.

"Yes."

"Okay, so the payout is agreed?"

"I'll have to talk to Harry."

"Those are my terms. Without me this operation would never get of the pad and you know it."

He got wearily to his feet.

"Okay, Jack. It's agreed."

When he had gone I rang room service and asked them to send their special for the day. The Maître d' said in a chilly voice that he understood I was now on the staff. If I wanted to eat, I would have to go to the restaurant.

I then went over to Macklin's office. He greeted me the way a high executive greets a staff hand. He asked me to return all the credit cards he had given me, then he shoved a form at me.

He told me once I had completed the form my first month's salary would be credited at the Florida Bank. After I had completed the form, he said I was no longer to use the Alfa. Wes Jackson had certainly been busy this morning.

I went over to the restaurant, had lunch and paid for it then returned to my cabin. After a while Bernie came in. He handed me a set of passport photographs.

"Did you talk to Harry?" I asked.

"Yes. He goes along with the share out." He looked thoughtfully at me. "You seem to have made quite a hit with him."

"That's something. Look Bernie, I'm no longer a VIP here. I need a car."

"Take mine: the Buick. I can use a staff car." He started towards the door, then paused. "I have a hell of a lot of work to do now Jack. We leave tomorrow at midday. What are you going to do with yourself while I'm away?"

"See Kendrick, then fly down to Mexico City and set up the company, then go home and spend a couple of weeks with my old man."

"You can reach me at the Avon Air Corporation, Texas from September 10th. Harry and I will be working on the course."

"Okay. Anyway we meet here on October 3rd?"

"Yes."

We shook hands.

As he opened the door, he looked uneasily at me. "You do think it will jell?"

I grinned at him.

"It's got to hasn't it?"

Louis de Mamey, Kendrick's stooge, weaved his way down the aisle of the gallery, bordered with art treasures, waving his hand at me.

"Mr. Crane! How nice!" he gushed. "Claude was only talking about you this morning. We were really wondering when we would see you again."

I looked around. The vast room was stuffed with items the rich would fall for.

"Is he around?"

"Of course. A tiny moment. I'll tell him," and he swished his behind along the aisle and disappeared through a doorway at the end of the gallery. He reappeared in moments and beckoned to me.

I went down the aisle and entered a vast room with a picture window looking onto the sea. sumptuously furnished with what seemed to me impressive looking antiques and pictures that were probably worth a fortune, hanging on the silk-covered walls.

Kendrick was sitting in a vast chair, his feet on a footstool.

He rose and offered his hand. His vast face lit up with a roguish smile.

"So glad, cheri. Do sit down. A tiny drink? Whisky? Champagne? We have everything. Do just say."

"Nothing, thanks." I lit a cigarette and sat down opposite him. De Mamey lurked in the background. "I want false passports." I laid the photos on an occasional table near him. "Can you fix that?"

"For whom?"

"Bernie, Erskine, myself and Pam."

His eyes studied me, then he nodded.

"You will have the new names?"

I took out my wallet and handed a slip of paper to him.

"It can be arranged, but it will cost, cheri." He blew out his cheeks and sighed. "Everything costs."

"You're financing this caper." I said. "I'm not interested in costs."

"Yes." He took the photos and the slip of paper, beckoned to de Mamey and handed them to him. "Arrange it, precious."

De Mamey went away.

Kendrick shifted his awful wig, then looked inquiringly at me.

"What else, cheri?"

"I want two thousand dollars in cash."

He grimaced.

"It will be deducted from your share."

"No, it won't. It's for expenses and you're taking care of the expenses."

He smiled, but his eyes were like wet stones "Yes." He heaved himself to his feet, went to a desk, opened a drawer and after fumbling around for some moments, returned with a roll of bills. "You have no doubt that this aircraft will be safely delivered?"

"Bernie delivers it. I don't. Ask him." I put the money in my hip pocket.

"You are satisfied with the runway?"

"Yes."

"Good. Is there anything else to discuss?"

I got to my feet.

"Not right now. When will the passports be ready?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

"I'll pick them up." As I started for the door, he said. "You foresee no trouble?"

I stared at him.

"Not from our side. Have you the money ready? One and a half million dollars?"

"It will be ready by the end of the week."

"I'll be giving you instructions how to deliver it. We have had a change of ideas about payment. We're forming a company in Mexico. I'll give you details later."

He squinted at me.

"How very wise to form a company."

"Yeah." I again stared at him. "The kite doesn't move until we get the advance payment."

"I understand." He paused, then went on, "If you need a sound Mexican lawyer. . ."

I cut him short.

"I'll handle that end of it. Well, so long," and left him.

I drove to the Florida Airlines and booked a 10.00 flight to Mexico City on September 6th, then with nothing else to do, I drove down to the beach and spent the rest of the afternoon chatting up a dolly bird who had a Playboy Bunny's body and a mind like a hole in a wall. Still, she amused me and then, when the sun began to set, she announced she had to return home to cook her husband's dinner. We parted amicably.

I decided I would take Tim out for a last drinking spree but I found him already packing. He apologised for not coming with me.

"I'm leaving at the crack of dawn Jack," he explained. "I've got a big job waiting for me in Rhodesia."

"You runway builders certainly get around." We had a drink together, said goodbye and I left him. I didn't feel like going out on the town by myself, so I went along to the restaurant, had a light supper and returned to my cabin. I switched on the telly.

Around 22.00 the telephone bell rang. Lifting the receiver, I heard a woman say, "Mr. Crane?"

I felt a tingle run up my spine. I didn't have to be told who was calling. Mrs. Essex had a very special kind of voice: Once heard never forgotten.

"Hi," I said.

"I will be at my cabin on September 24th for five days," she said. "You are invited," and she hung up.

I replaced the receiver, lit a cigarette, turned of the telly and dropped into a lounging chair. Since she and I had got together, she had been seldom out of my mind. I had kept wondering if our explosive affair had been a "ships that pass in the night" thing: now I knew it wasn't. Five days and I was invited! Five days with her alone in that hidden cabin! Eighteen days to wait! I drew in a long, deep breath. I didn't sleep much that night.

The following afternoon I collected the passports. Kendrick was out, but de Mamey coped with me. My passport was good.

I was, now Jack Norton. I checked the other passports: they were all as good as mine.

"Satisfied?" de Mamey asked.

"Sure. Give the fatboy my love," I said and left him.

My old man was at the station to meet me. He looked taller and thinner and older.

We shook hands and we walked to his beat-up Chevy.

"How's it been going Jack?" he asked as he drove the car away from the little station towards his house.

"Pretty good Dad. How are things with you."

"The usual. One doesn't expect much when you have reached my age. Still, the bank is going well. I had four new accounts this week."

A triumph! I thought, and my mind dwelt on the million and a quarter I would soon be owning.

"That's fine, dad."

"Well, it's not bad. I've got a good steak for your supper tonight. You been eating all right, son?"

"Sure."

"You look fit."

"That's what I am."

There was a long silence while he drove. I looked at the streets, the small shops, the small time people. Some of them waved to the old man. Already I was beginning to regret coming back, but I had to.

This was the last time I would see him. In another thirty days I'd be dead to him and I would have to remain dead if I was to hang onto all that money.

When we got home, I went up to my small shabby bedroom — what a contrast to the luxury cabin on the Essex's airfield! — and unpacked. Then I went down to the living room. My old man produced a bottle of Cutty Sark.

"Go ahead Jack. Make yourself a drink," he said. "Not for me. Whisky doesn't seem to agree with me anymore."

I gave him a sharp look.

"Are you all right. Dad?"

He smiled his gentle smile.

"I'm sixty-nine. For my age, as they say, I am all right. Get your drink and come and sit down."

"When are you going to retire?"

"The Bank talked about it, but I told them I wanted to carry on. My clients don't want me to go so it was decided I could keep on until I have to stop." He smiled again. "I don't want to stop yet."

I made myself a stiff whisky and water, found ice, then came and sat down.

"Tell me what you have been doing" he said.

That I wasn't going to do, but I told him that I was now working for Lane Essex, that I was on his payroll, that a new kite was expected and I had charge of its maintenance.

"Lane Essex?" My old man looked impressed. "A clever man . . . he must be worth a billion. They say he has cut corners." He shrugged. "I don't suppose any man can make his kind of money without cutting corners." He regarded me, his eyes sad. "So you're settling in Paradise City? I won't see much of you."

"Oh, come on. Dad! I hope you'll take your vacation down there. Anyway, when I'm on vacation, I'll come here." I hated myself talking this way to him for I knew in a couple of weeks I'd never see him again.

"You hungry, son?" He heaved himself out of his chair. "Do you think it would be an idea to have some fried onions with the steak?" He looked hopefully at me. "I've bought some."

"Why, sure."

"Just leave it to me." He started across the room towards the kitchen, paused and asked. "Did you meet Mrs. Essex, Jack?"

I stiffened.

"I met her."

"I understand she is a very beautiful woman. I saw a photo of her in a magazine, but photos can be deceptive . . . is she?"

"You could say that. Yes, she's beautiful."

He nodded and went into the kitchen. I finished my drink, lit a cigarette and thought back on the past week.

I had flown down to Mexico City and had booked in at a minor hotel overlooking the Alameda Gardens. I had gone to the National Bank of Mexico and had introduced myself as Jack Norton. I told the executive that I wanted to form a company with a starting capital of a million and a half dollars. From that moment I had no trouble. He produced forms and filled them in for me. He said there would be no problem. I gave him Bernie's new name as President of the Company and told him I was the Managing Director. I added Erskine's and Pam's new names, saying they were directors. I spent half an hour signing forms and he told me within the week the Blue Ribbon Air Taxi Service would be registered as a going concern. I told him the money would be credited to the company about the same time.

We shook hands, he bowed to the floor and I left him.

It was as easy as that. Foreign money, specially dollars, was what the Mexican economy wanted.

Now here I was with that hurdle jumped, back in my old man's shabby little home. We ate the steak which was good, talked some more and then went to bed.

That was the first day I don't know how I endured the next seven days, but somehow, because of my old man I did.

He was at the bank all day and I was on my own I went around and met the girls but I found them so dreary, so dull and so goddamn awful after Mrs. Victoria Essex that I stopped going out. I stayed home, watching the telly, smoking and counting the hours until September 24th.

On the night of September 23rd, I suggested we two might go out and have a farewell dinner together.

"I could cook you something Jack," he said, "but if you want to go out. . ."

"Don't you? I bet you haven't been to a restaurant since Mum died."

"That's true. Well, it will make a change. Yes, let's do that."

We went to the best restaurant in town: nothing special, but decent enough. The restaurant was fairly full and everyone there seemed to know my old man. It was quite a procession to our table. He had to stop and shake hands, introduce me before he moved onto the next table. All small time people and they bored me rigid, but I was as pleasant as I could be.

"You're quite a personality here. Dad," I said as we finally settled at our table. "I had no idea you were so popular."

He smiled happily.

"Well, son, you don't work in a town for forty-five years without making friends."

"I guess that's right."

The Maître d' came over and shook hands. He was a tired, fat looking little man and his tuxedo was shiny and worn, but he treated my old man as if he were the President and I dug for that.

"What would you like Dad?" I asked. "No . . . not steak!"

He laughed. He looked really happy. His reception had done him a load of good.

"Well. . ."

"Let's have oysters and the game pie."

His eyes lit up.

"Well. . . the oysters come high Jack."

We had the oysters with champagne and the game pie with a decent claret. After the food I had eaten in Paradise City, this was pretty poor fare, but my old man really enjoyed it.

After the meal, a couple of old guys, fat, faded and pompous, came over and joined us. One of them was the Mayor, the other the Commissioner of Parks. My old man had a real ball. I went along, thinking of tomorrow.

When we got home, my old man said, "Well, Jack, that was the nicest evening I've had since Mum passed away. We two could have a good time together if you took over Johnson's garage."

"Not yet, dad." I said, "but maybe some time," and I felt like a heel.

I picked up Bernie's Buick at the Paradise City airport and drove along the highway.

I thought of my old man, working at this small time bank, aged sixty-nine, and how he would react when he learned that I had died in an air crash. I thought too of the fact that I was now on Essex's payroll at thirty thousand dollars a year and could earn more. Maybe I was nuts to go ahead with this hijacking.

Why couldn't I accept the job Essex had given me and not take the risk of stealing this kite? Then I thought of what a million and a quarter dollars meant. I could never hope to make a sum like that even if I remained in the Essex set-up until I was retired.

One thing I was sure of: once I got paid my cut, I would leave Bernie. I had no faith in the Blue Ribbon Air Taxi Service Corp.

I would take my money and go to Europe. Just where I would settle I had no idea, but I would settle somewhere and with all that money, well invested. I could lead a life that had to have interests.

I reached the secluded cabin around midday. I wondered if Mrs. Essex was waiting for me. Mrs. Essex? I found it hard to think of her as Victoria . . . even Vicky. There was something about her that didn't

encourage familiarity even though I had slapped her behind and had screwed her. She was a very special woman.

I pulled up outside the cabin. As I got out of the car, the cabin door opened and the negro groom came out, smiling.

The sight of him really shook me. I stared at him as he came towards me. He was lean, tall with a flat nose, sparkling black eyes and he had on a white coat, green slacks and his splayed feet were in green sandals.

"Hello there, Mr. Crane," he said.

"Hi!"

What the hell is this? I was thinking.

"Mrs. Essex won't be here until after lunch, Mr. Crane."

"Oh . . . well. . ." I was floundering.

"I'll get your bag." He paused and smiled at me "I'm Sam Washington Jones. You call me Sam: okay?"

"Sure."

He opened the trunk and took out my bag.

"I'll show you to your room, Mr. Crane."

He led the way into the cabin, paused at the door, nodded at it, said, "That's Mrs. Essex's bedroom." He moved along the passage and opened a door. "This is your room, Mr. Crane."

"Thanks."

"May I unpack your bag, Mr. Crane?"

"I can do it."

He put my bag by the bed.

"Lunch in half an hour. May I get you a drink, Mr. Crane?"

"A whisky on the rocks, please."

I stood for a minute or so. Then I told myself she would have to have someone to take care of her. A woman like her wouldn't be able to cook, look after the cabin, make the beds. I wondered how she had corrupted this nice looking negro.

I unpacked, put my things in the closet, washed up in the bathroom and then went into the lounge. A double whisky on the rocks stood on an occasional table. I sat down, drank, lit a cigarette and waited.

Sam came in after twenty minutes.

"You ready to eat. Mr. Crane?"

"I'm always ready to eat."

He grinned and went away. A few minutes later, he came in wheeling a trolley. As a starter I had ten king sized prawns. The main dish was kebab served with a curry sauce. There was coffee and brandy to finish.

"You're some cook Sam," I said.

"Yes, Mr. Crane, Missy likes good food."

I sat there, smoking and relaxing, then around 15.00 I heard the

sound of an approaching car. I got up and went out into the open.

Mrs. Essex came belting up the drive in a Porsche and she waved to me as she nailed the car a few feet from me.

"Hi! Jack!" She got out of the car.

God! She looked marvellous. She was wearing a jazzy shirt, like a Picasso painting and white slacks that looked painted on wet.

"You look terrific," I said.

She gave me an up from under look and smiled.

"You think so?"

She came to me and linked her arm around mine.

"Did Sam take care of you?"

"Sure. He's a marvellous cook."

We walked into the cabin and she moved away from me and dropped into a lounging chair.

"Surprised?" She smiled up at me.

"You say that again!"

"Pleased?"

"That's to put it mildly."

She laughed. God! She was a gorgeous looking woman!

"Right now I am spending five days with my sister in New York," she told me. "She has the same problem as I have so we cooperate. I lie for her and she lies for me." Again she laughed. "Lane is far too busy to take care of me." She looked up at me, her eyes sparkling. "You will, won't you?"

I held out my hand.

"Why wait?" I said.

The next five days slipped away, following a pattern. We slept together, made love, got up around 10.00, had breakfast served by Sam, then rode in the forest. She was marvellous on a horse. I kept looking at her as she rode. Then we came back to the cabin and Sam served us a meal. We went to bed after the meal and she was always wildly excited when I covered her.

Then we took a long walk with the sun shining on us, through the forest, holding hands. She didn't talk much. She just seemed to want me by her, holding her hand and wandering. Then when the sun set we returned to the cabin and closed the shutters. We had drinks and watched telly, then Sam brought in a light supper, but Sam's light suppers were extra special: a lobster soufflé, trout with almonds, an egg salad with smoked salmon and so on. Neither of us attempted to talk as ordinary people will talk. This was a sexual thing. She wanted me as if I were a stallion: personal feelings didn't exist. The surroundings were wonderful. Sam's food was wonderful and she was wonderful.

On our last night, when I knew Bernie, the following day, would fly

in the new kite, we had a special dinner. We started with quails, then a pheasant with all the trimmings, washed down with a Latcur 1959.

"I now go back to Lane," she said as we sniffed brandies.

She smiled at me. "Was it good?"

"For me . . . marvellous, the best. And you?"

"Mmmm!"

She got up and I watched her walk around the big lounge, watching the slow sensual move of her firm buttocks and the way she lifted her breasts.

"You're a better lover than Lane."

"Is that right?" I stared at her. "Only because I have time to make love to you and he hasn't."

"A woman needs love. When she is unfortunate enough to get hooked up with a man who can only think of making money. . ." She shrugged. "Money and business: a woman needs taking care of. . ."

Sam came in to offer more coffee.

As he poured, he said. "Should I pack your bag, Mrs. Essex?"

"Please."

So this was the end of an experience. This woman who had given herself so freely to me seemed to me like my old man.

She and he from tomorrow wouldn't exist for me. By tomorrow I would be in the Condor and I would be dead to the world. I would never see my old man again, but this I had come to accept.

He had had his life, but it hurt that I would no longer see this woman again as she sat by my side, those marvellous violet eyes dwelling on my face.

When Sam had gone, she said. "I have had a lot of men Jack. A woman needs a man and Lane—I've said this before—is too busy to bother with me and also too tired. You wouldn't know how frustrating it is for someone like me to wait around for her man to return and then to find he's too tired. Men only think of themselves. He imagines I can just sit around and wait for him to get in the mood." She patted my hand. "This is our last safe night together Jack but if we are careful, there could be other nights." She got to her feet. "Let's go to bed."

The following morning I watched her take off in the Porsche.

She waved once, then was gone.

Sam came out into the sunshine.

"Your bag's packed, Mr. Crane."

I offered him a twenty-dollar bill

"Not for me," he said, smiling. "This has been my pleasure."

So I left him and drove back to the airfield.

Around 15.00, the new Condor settled on the runway. I drove out in a jeep and arrived as Bernie and Erskine came down onto the tarmac.

"Some kite." I said as I joined them.

"You don't know the half of it. It's a real beauty." Bernie said.

"No problems?"

"Not a thing: she flies like a bird."

We looked at each other.

"When is the night test to be?"

"I thought Saturday."

That gave us three clear days.

"You're sure there are no problems?"

"Not a thing," Erskine joined in. "She's marvellous."

"Take a look Jack," Bernie said. "I've got paperwork to do and then I've got to phone Mr. Essex. Harry will show you around."

He got in one of the waiting jeeps and drove off.

Harry and I climbed into the kite. It had everything a top executive could wish for. There were six cabins, beautifully fitted out as sleeping quarters. Essex's private suite was really something in luxury. There was a narrow long conference room that could sit ten people: a small secretary's office equipped down to an I.B.M. Executive, a bar: a small beautifully equipped kitchen and at the far end were two less well equipped cabins for the staff.

"It seems to have everything but a swimming pool." I said after the tour. "A shame, isn't it, that this greaser will tear out all the luxury and fill the kite with Cubans and arms."

Harry shrugged.

"That's the way the cookie crumbles. I couldn't care less so long as I get money."

"So Saturday night?"

He nodded.

"How do you feel about it, Harry? About being dead? About never coming back to the U.S. of A."

"Yeah: it's a tough decision, but there's no way else I could make this kind of money."

"Are you going in with Bernie and his taxi service?"

He shook his head.

"Not me. I've no faith in it. I'll take my cut and blow. How's about you?"

"The same. Any ideas where you'll go?"

"Rio. I've connections there. And you?"

"Maybe Europe. The first thing is to get the money."

"Think there'll be trouble about that?"

"Not the way I've fixed it." I went on to tell him about setting up the company, about my talk with Kendrick. "It should be okay."

We got in the jeep and headed for the control tower. While we were drinking beer, Bernie joined us. He said he had talked to Mr. Essex in

Paris and told him he would night test the plane on Saturday night.

"I'd better go see Kendrick." I said. "If the operation is for Saturday night. I want that bank receipt. And Bernie, get the guns on board and ammo. We each have a machine pistol. What else can you dig up?"

Bernie looked at Harry.

"You know the armoury."

"We've got three Jap Armalites: that's really a weapon and there are around four Chicago Planos."

"Let's have one of each. How about grenades?"

"Can do."

"Say six."

They both stared at me.

"Are you really expecting trouble Jack?" Bernie asked, sweat showing on his forehead.

"I want to be sure we can stop trouble."

"Well. . ."

"Get those weapons on board." I got to my feet "I'll go talk to Kendrick. Suppose we have dinner together and tie this all up?"

"Sure," Bernie said. "We meet at my cabin. I'll order a meal."

"Around 20.30?"

"Okay."

I took Bernie's Buick and drove into Paradise City. Three hours later, I knocked on Bernie's cabin door and he opened up.

Harry was drinking Scotch and he got up to make me a drink.

"How did you get on?" Bernie asked. He looked worried and there were smudges under his eyes.

I sat down, took the drink Harry offered me."

"Friday we get the bank receipt. I told that fat queer the kite doesn't move until I get it," I grinned at Bernie. "Relax. It's okay. This is going to work."

But how was I to know the one thing none of us even thought of would occur? It looked fine to me. I had taken a lot of trouble to make it look fine, but there is always something, repeat something, that none of us could have imagined.

On Friday afternoon I collected the bank receipt from-Kendrick. I told him the kite would be delivered in the early hours on Sunday morning and there were no problems. I then sent a cable to Aulestria giving him the same information.

Then I returned to the airfield and put a call through to the National Bank of Mexico. I asked the executive with whom I had dealt if the money had arrived. He said it had and had been credited to the Blue Ribbon Air Taxi Service Corp. I could almost hear him bowing as he spoke. I relayed the news to Bernie and Harry.

“Now it’s up to you two to deliver the kite.” I said. “I’ve done my stint.”

All Friday afternoon, from 15.30 to 19.00, we three worked on the kite. I familiarised myself with the jets while Bernie and Harry worked in the flight cabin. No problems came up.

Saturday morning was spent in the control tower while Bernie and Harry logged our flight schedule. My crew looked a little blank when I told them I wanted full fuel capacity. They filled the tanks while I watched.

The hijack takeoff was scheduled for 20.30. By that time it would be dark. In the afternoon we took the plane on a test flight around Miami and back. She behaved beautifully.

Harry had got the guns on board and I took charge of them.

I concealed one of the Armalite AR 180 high velocity rifles in Essex’s bedroom. I put it under the mattress. This rifle fired a .223 dum-dum bullet that would kill instantly. The second Armalite I concealed in one of the staff cabins. The Thompson sub-machine gun, known as a Chicago Piano, I hid in the flight cabin. The six hand grenades I hid in a locker by the entrance door to the kite. The machine pistols we decided we would carry on our hips. I took Bernie and Harry around, showing them where I had concealed the weapons.

“We may not need them.” I said, “but if there’s trouble, you know where to find them.”

I could see Bernie didn’t like any of this and he looked pale, worried and he sweated. Harry just nodded.

Well, that seemed to be that. We had three hours to wait before we took off. I said I was going to pack my things, left them and returned to my cabin. I gave myself a drink, lit a cigarette, then after hesitating, I put a call through to my old man. This, I knew, was the last time I would speak to him. I realised as I was waiting for the connection that I would miss him and again I had doubts that I was planning the right

thing for my future.

He came on the line after a delay.

"I was cutting the grass Jack. I only just heard the bell."

I asked him how he was.

"I'm all right. And you?"

"I'm fine." I told him we were night testing the Condor.

"Is that dangerous?"

I forced a laugh.

"Nothing to it. Dad, just routine. I have a few minutes to kill and I got thinking of you: I enjoyed my stay." I wanted to say something nice to him to remember me by. "That was a great evening we had together. We'll repeat it."

"You're sure this night flight is going to be all right?"

"Sure, Dad." I paused, then plunged on. "I've got to go now. I just wanted to hear your voice again. Take care of yourself."

"There's nothing wrong?"

"Everything's fine. Well, see you Dad," and I hung up.

I sat staring at the opposite wall. I felt it had been a mistake to call him. Now I knew he would worry. He was shrewd. I hadn't ever called him long distance before. Well, at least I had heard his voice for the last time I gave myself another drink, then my mind switched to Mrs. Essex. I had a longing to hear her voice too for the last time, but I hesitated. This could be a dangerous call. I decided against it, but after wandering around my cabin and having another drink, I walked over to the telephone and dialled the number of the Essex home. I told myself if the butler answered, I would hang up but she answered.

"Hi!" I said.

"Oh . . . you."

"Yes. Can you talk?"

"He's not back until Tuesday: yes. I can talk."

That marvellous voice! I saw that body and those violet coloured eyes.

"I've missed you," I said.

"Let's do something tonight Jack." Her voice was urgent. "Jackson is taking his wife to a show. He'll be out of the way. Let's meet somewhere."

"I can't. We're doing a night test flight on the Condor at 20.30. I've got to go along."

"Oh, hell! I want you Jack!"

"How about Sunday night?" I was now wishing I hadn't started this and knowing on Sunday night I would be in Yucatan.

"Can't you get out of this test flight?"

"Not a chance." I now really wished I hadn't started this. I knew how determined she could be. "Let's make it Sunday, huh?"

"No! Jackson will be around: He'll be around Monday too. It must be tonight!"

"It can't be done I'm sorry. I'll call you later," and I hung up.

That was a mistake, I told myself. Why couldn't I keep my stupid mouth shut? I looked at the time. It was just after 19.00.

As I flung my things into a suitcase, the phone bell rang. Fearing it was Mrs. Essex, I ignored it. I went to the restaurant and joined Bernie and Harry for a steak dinner. Bernie looked uneasy.

He scarcely ate a thing.

"Did you talk to Pam?" I asked.

"She's now on her way to Merida."

"She okay?"

He blotted his sweating face with his handkerchief.

"I think so. She doesn't like it, of course, but she'll be all right once we join up."

"Yeah." To change the subject, I said. "How do you feel about landing the kite in the dark and the jungle?"

"The Met report is good. I don't see any problem."

I shoved my plate away and looked at my watch. The time was 20.15.

"Might as well get moving." I stood up.

Harry said. "Just for the hell of it, I stocked the fridge. We could get hungry."

"That's a smart idea."

"I don't believe in starving." Harry grinned. "If we get lost, a fridge full of food is a great morale booster."

"We won't get lost!" Bernie snapped. "Don't talk wet!"

Harry winked at me and we followed Bernie out into the starlit night and climbed into a jeep. The three of us knew this was the last time we would be on American soil. It was a sobering thought and none of us spoke as Harry drove us to the waiting Condor.

The crew were waiting. The Chief Engineer, a guy named Thompson, gave me a thumb's up sign as we got out of the jeep.

"All correct, Mr. Crane." he said and grinned. There was something sly about that grin that made me stare at him, but when Bernie said, "Let's go," I thought no more about it.

Bernie and Harry went to the flight cabin. I closed the exit door and then joined them.

Bernie went through the takeoff routine, then talked to Air Control.

"Okay, Fred?"

"Sure: no traffic around, Bernie. It's all yours."

A few minutes later we were airborne. We looked at one another.

"Three million dollars, here we come!" Harry exclaimed.

I stood around until Bernie headed out to sea. I was feeling restless.

I left them and wandered into the conference room, looked around, then went into the kitchen. I peered into the refrigerator. There was a good selection of canned foods. I went past Essex's suite and entered one of the guest cabins where I had left my suitcase. There was nothing for me to do for at least forty minutes. I lay on the bed, lit a cigarette and tried not to think of my future, but I didn't succeed. I kept thinking I was walking out on a top class job, paying thirty thousand a year and I was also walking out on Mrs. Essex. A million and a half dollars! What the hell would I do with all that money? I asked myself. I would have to begin an entirely new life. It —was all right to imagine living in Europe, but I couldn't speak any language except my own. I was cutting myself off from a way of life I had known. Was money everything? So why had I started this? This was pretty late thinking, I told myself. I was committed now. In forty minutes I would be dead to my old man. to Mrs. Essex and to the various people who knew me.

I had got beyond the point of no return.

I looked out of the cabin window and watched the lights of Paradise City, then Miami fading in the distance. I watched until a sea mist blotted them out and I realised I was seeing them for the last time.

Worried by my thoughts, I went back to the flight cabin.

Looking at the altimeter over Bernie's shoulder, I saw he was climbing.

"Another ten minutes," Harry said.

When Bernie got to twenty-five thousand feet, he levelled out.

"Harry, you talk to Fred," he said, his voice husky. "I've got the shakes."

Harry and I looked at each other. He raised his eyebrows.

"No, you haven't, Bernie." I said, putting my hands on his shoulders. "You dreamed this one up. You handle it."

He shook off my hands and wiped his sweating face.

"Look guys, should we do this?" he said. "We have still time to turn around. Should we do it?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Harry barked.

Bernie lifted his shoulders in a helpless shrug.

"Yes." He turned his white face so he could look at me. "Will it work out Jack?"

I was suddenly tempted to tell him to turn around, but while I was hesitating. Harry grabbed the mike.

"Fred!" His voice was high pitched. "We're in trouble. The two port engines are on fire. The goddamn extinguishers aren't working!" I could hear Air Control shouting. Harry cut in on him.

"We're ditching our position." Then he snapped off the radio. "Put her down Bernie."

Like a zombie, Bernie showed the nose down and we screamed into a dive towards the sea.

Harry put down the mike.

"Here we go," he said, "How did it sound?"

"It almost convinced me." I was feeling shaken. My hesitation had settled my future.

"I bet Fred is laying eggs."

I was watching Bernie. He began to level out. "We were some eight hundred feet above the sea now. He took the kite lower. Then when we were three hundred feet and when I could see the waves, he headed for Yucatan.

"This calls for a drink."

"Yes: get me a coke Jack," Bernie said huskily.

"Me too," Harry said.

I left them and went into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and took from it three bottles of coke. As I began to break out ice, a voice said softly, "Hi! Jack!"

I dropped the ice container into the sink.

I would know that voice anywhere. I felt blood drain out of my face as I turned.

Smiling at me, in the doorway of the kitchen, was Mrs. Victoria Essex.

I was vaguely aware that the floor was vibrating and that told me Bernie was flying at maximum.

Cold sweat broke out all over my body. My heart skipped a beat and then began to race.

"Surprised?" Mrs. Essex laughed. "You said it couldn't be done." She laughed again. "That's fighting talk to me: nothing is impossible . . . so here I am. How long is the test flight going to last?"

I tried to speak, but my mouth had dried up and my racing heart made me breathless.

I just gaped at her.

"Jack! What's the matter? Aren't you pleased?"

"What are you doing here?" My voice was a croak.

Her beautiful eyebrows came down in a frown.

"Doing here? This is my plane! What do you mean?"

"How did you get on board?"

"What's that to do with it? I told the Chief Engineer I intended to fly with you."

I remembered Thompson's sly smile.

"This is a test flight." I was now over the shock and was forcing my brain to work. "Mr. Essex would blow his stack if he knew you were on board. This could be dangerous."

"I don't give a damn! Lane need never know." She moved into the

kitchen. "Aren't you pleased?"

"But Thompson will rat on you!"

"Oh, skip it! He's as scared of me as Jackson. I asked you: how long will the test flight last?"

"Three hours . . . I don't know."

"Let's christen Lane's bed. I want you."

I wanted her right now like I wanted cancer.

"They're waiting for drinks."

"Give them their drinks: I'll wait in the suite." She reached out and touched my face. "This is going to be a new experience for both of us."

Her touch was like the kiss of death to me.

I watched her walk along the aisle and disappear into the Essex's suite. My mind worked frantically. Questions without answers crowded into my mind.

Should I tell Bernie and Harry she was with us? Should we turn back? How the hell could we when Harry had told Air Control we were ditching? We were beyond the point of return!

So what did we do? I tried to imagine the reception Mrs. Victoria Essex would get if those Mexican thugs caught sight of her and I flinched at the thought. I had managed to persuade Bernie to leave Pam out of the trip and she was a long way behind Mrs. Essex in looks. I had a feeling that neither Bernie nor Harry would give a damn about her: both had reasons to hate her.

But she had that fatal thing for me, and I knew I wouldn't stand by and see her raped by a bunch of greasers.

I decided I had to tell her what she had walked into before breaking the news to Bernie and Harry.

I took the cokes to the flight cabin.

"You've taken your time," Harry said, grabbing the drink. "I'm dying of thirst."

"Sorry: the ice container was tricky."

He grinned at me.

"We have luck, not a ship in sight."

"No problems, Bernie?" My heart was thumping.

He finished the coke and handed me the empty glass.

"So far. . . okay."

Harry was wearing headphones: one clamped to his right ear the other against the side of his neck.

"Fred had called out the navy."

"Will we get there, Bernie?" I asked: "Sure. At this height the radar can't spot us."

"Okay. I'll leave it to you two. I'll take a nap."

"Going to try out the Essex bed?" Harry laughed. "I guess that holy of holies couldn't come alive without a woman."

I rubbed the sweat of my chin.

"See you," I said and left them.

I walked down the aisle, then went in the Essex suite. She was lying on the big circular bed. I could see she was naked under the sheet she had drawn across her.

"Come on Jack," she said. "We haven't much time," and she held out her arms to me. "Are the others busy?" and closed the door and shot the bolt.

"You're in trouble," I said. "I'm in trouble too."

She stared at me.

"What does that mean?"

"Right now, this plane is being hijacked."

The sexy light went out of her eyes. Now her mouth turned thin and her face became a hard mask. Mrs. Victoria Essex wasn't Mrs. Victoria Essex for nothing. Her brain worked as fast as quick silver.

"Are Olson and Erskine stealing this plane?"

"That's it"

"Are you in this too?"

"Yes."

I had to admire her. She looked as unruffled as a bishop at a tea party.

"Where are we going?"

"Yucatan. We arrive in two and a half hours . . . with luck."

She threw aside the sheet and slid of the bed. I watched her as she walked, naked, to where she had left her clothes. I watched her dress quickly and without fuss.

She then walked to the mirror and ran a comb through her hair. Satisfied she looked like the always glamorous Mrs. Victoria Essex, she turned slowly and regarded me.

"We have time. I'll talk to Olson. Was this his bright little idea?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll tell him to turn around and go back."

She started towards the door, but I didn't move and she confronted me.

"Get out of my way Jack!"

"Three million dollars are involved," I said quietly. "Not even you can talk Olson nor Erskine out of that."

"Get out of my way!" Her eyes flashed. "I'll talk to him!"

"Get wise! Olson has no use for you. Erskine hates you. If you go to the flight cabin and sound off Erskine will knock you over the head and drop you into the sea. I'm telling you: you're in trouble."

She stared at me for a long moment.

"Am I in trouble with you too Jack?"

"I'll do my best for you. Why the hell did you have to come on

board?"

"What does your best mean?"

"I'll do what I can to protect you."

"That's kind of you." She turned away and wandered over to the big, circular bed. "I think I prefer to protect myself."

Before I could move, she had drawn the Armalite rifle from under the mattress where I had hidden it and pointed it at me.

"Don't move!" The snap in her voice made me stiffen. "No one is hijacking me! Don't imagine I can't handle this gun. Go ahead Jack, we're going to the flight cabin."

"This won't get you anywhere," I said. "I'm on your side, but we've got beyond the point of no return."

"No, we haven't! Go ahead!"

I wondered how Bernie and Harry would react when I came into the flight cabin with her and the gun. I drew the bolt and stepped out into the aisle, I had an idea she wouldn't shoot me if I turned on her and I suddenly didn't give a damn. I opted to be neutral. If she could force Bernie to turn the plane around.

I'd go along. If Bernie and Harry were smart enough to outplay her. I'd also go along. The ball was in her court.

Because I was half in love with her and because I really didn't know what I was going to do with a million and a quarter dollars, I went like a zombie into the flight cabin.

Harry turned his head as I entered.

"Short nap Jack," he said. "Your conscience worrying you?"

I moved aside and Mrs. Essex stood in the doorway, pointing the gun at him and Bernie.

Harry stared, his jaw dropping, then he made a move to get to his feet.

"Stay still!" she snapped.

Harry relaxed back in his seat.

"For God's sake, Bernie! Look who's here!"

Bernie glanced over his shoulder, stared at her, stared at the gun and his face turned the colour of a dead, stale fish.

"You're not hijacking this plane!" she said. "Turn around! We're going back to the airfield!"

Harry grinned at her.

"No, we're not. And there is nothing you can do about it, baby. That gun means nothing. You start shooting and we'll all dive into the sea."

"I said turn around!"

Harry shrugged.

"Run away, hot pants, you bore me." He shifted in his seat so his back was to her.

"Olson! Do you hear me!" She was a tryer. "Turn this plane around

and fly back to the airfield.”

Bernie said nothing. He stared at the instrument panels as if he hadn't heard her.

She looked at me, her eyes blazing.

“Make him turn around Jack!”

“Yeah . . . go ahead Jack, make us turn around.” Harry said and laughed. Then glaring at her, he snarled, “Get out of here, you spoiled, over rich hooker! Get out!”

She hesitated for a moment, then ran down the aisle and into Essex's suite. She slammed the door.

“Well!” Harry stared at me. “How did she get on board?”

“Thompson let her on.”

“What are we going to do?” Bernie's voice sounded strangled.

“Let the dagoes cope with her,” Harry said. “Why should we care?”

“No!” I said.

His eyes hardened.

“Oh, yeah? You getting it from her Jack?”

“We can't let her fall into those thugs, hands.”

“So what? Why should we care . . . or do you?”

“Yes, I care,” I said. “Listen, Bernie, it's one thing to hijack this plane but another to kidnap Mrs. Lane Essex! The heat will be . . .”

“Oh, skip it!” Harry snapped. “We're all dead and in the sea . . . remember? Thompson will have reported she was on board. So Essex will think she went into the drink with us. There'll be no heat.”

“He's right,” Bernie said. “We didn't ask her to come. Now she's here, she'll have to look after herself.”

“Go and hold her hand Jack” Harry sneered. “We're busy.”

I left the flight cabin and going down the aisle, reached the suite. I knocked on the door.

“It's me: Jack”

“Stay away! No one's coming in here! No one!”

“I've got to talk to you.”

“No one's coming in here! I'll shoot first.”

“You haven't a chance. Come on, be sensible. Let me in!”

The vicious crack of the gun startled me. The .233 bullet smashed through the top of the door. It missed my head by six inches: too damn close for safety.

I hurriedly stepped back.

“Next time I shoot lower.”

“Okay, then you're out on your own.”

“And I'll manage!”

I went back to the flight cabin and told them. Harry laughed “So why should we care? We deliver the kite. It's up to the greasers to wrinkle her out: they'll love it.”

“Talk sense! No one’s going to get near her with that gun!”

“All they have to do is to wait her out. It’ll be goddamn hot when we arrive and the air conditioners will be of Without food and drink, how long do you imagine she’ll last?” That was something I hadn’t thought of.

We had been flying now for fifty minutes, crossing the Gulf of Mexico, still at three hundred above the sea.

I sat on a stool behind Bernie while Harry listened to the radio, headphones clamped to his ears.

I thought of the woman, alone in the Essex suite. I wondered what she was doing. She certainly had guts! What would happen to her when we landed? Was it possible to conceal her, then get her away? I knew I would get no help from Bernie nor Harry. That was for sure. We would land in the jungle surrounded by Orzoco’s thugs. How could I get her away?

Harry said suddenly. “It’s on the air. The world now knows that the fabulous, glamorous Mrs. Victoria Essex was on board and she, like the intrepid birdmen crashed into the sea. It’ll be front page news tomorrow. How do you like it Bernie?”

Bernie didn’t say anything. He had been flying the plane now in complete silence. I could see sweat running down the back of his neck and his greying hair looked as if it had been ducked in a bucket of water.

“I bet those greasers are smacking their chops,” Harry went on. “Man! Will I get a bang to see them lay their paws on that bitch. She has it coming!”

“Shut up!” I said.

He looked at me, an ugly expression on his face.

“You’ve gone soft on her, haven’t you, sucker?”

“I said shut up!” I got up and left the cabin.

“Hi Jack!”

I turned.

Harry came out into the aisle and closed the cabin door.

He joined me. His eyes were vicious.

“Let’s get this straight,” he said, a snarl in his voice. “We don’t want any trouble now we’ve got so far. We’re all in this for three million dollars. Just what is this bitch to you?”

“I’m not standing by and seeing her raped by a bunch of greasers.” I said quietly. “We’ve got to get her out of this mess.”

He shook his head.

“No! To hell with her! She once played me for a sucker and that’s something I don’t forget. She’s no better than a hooker. You start something and you won’t find me on your side. Understand?”

“Is that right?” I was getting mad myself now. “So what are you

going to do?"

He glared at me.

"No one - including you - stands between me and my cut."

Then he did something I could never take. He began digging his forefinger into my chest to emphasise his words. "I don't give a damn if you're horny about this hooker. . ."

I hit him solidly on the side of his jaw. It was a reflex action and the moment I had done it, I regretted it. He went down like a felled ox and his head thudded against a row of metal studs, lining the floor.

I stared down at him, then knelt and lifted his head. My hand became sticky with blood. A cold chill ran through me. Had I killed him?

"Harry!"

I could see he was breathing, but he looked bad. I laid his head down gently and stood up.

"Thieves fall out?"

She was standing in the doorway of the Essex suite, the Armalite in her hands.

I stared at her.

"Olson won't get the kite down without him." I said breathlessly. "There's something wrong with Olson! Do something! Get this man on his feet!"

"I wouldn't touch that sonofabitch if it cost me my life!" she said, her face like stone.

"It could do, you fool!"

"I ran back to the flight cabin Looking through the plexiglass I saw sandy beach and then jungle ahead.

"Bernie! Harry's had an accident He's knocked out!"

He didn't say anything. He just sat there, his shirt and head soaked in sweat.

"Bernie!" I bawled at him. "Hear me?"

"Don't touch me." His voice was a husky croak.

"Make altitude! We're too low!"

We were now only two hundred feet above the dense jungle. He gave a shuddering sigh that chilled me as he pulled back the stick. The kite's nose lifted. We were now flying fast over the jungle.

"Higher! Get her up!"

"For God's sake Jack, leave me alone!"

There was something about him that scared the hell out of me. His stiff, set position, the sweat and now his voice.

I ran back into the aisle and shook Harry, but he was out to the world. Rushing into the kitchen, I drew water into a bowl, rushed back and threw the water in his face: this produced no reaction.

She still stood in the doorway, watching.

“Do something!” I yelled at her. “Olson can’t make the landing! Get this man on his feet!”

She turned, entered the suite and slammed the door. I heard the bolt snap to.

For a moment I stared down at Harry, then I rushed back to the flight cabin.

I saw we had lost altitude again and now we were flying less than a hundred feet above the dense jungle.

“Bernie! Pull her up!” I shouted.

He made a feeble effort to pull back the stick, then a moan of a man in agony escaped him.

“Bernie! What’s wrong? Are you ill?” I slid into the copilot’s seat. “Bernie!”

“My heart. . . I’m dying. . .” Then he fell forward. His body shoved the stick forward and the nose went down.

As I heard the undercarriage smashing through the tree tops. I flicked up the various switches, cuffing the engines. In the split second that remained to me I saw Bernie’s eyes roll back and I knew he was dead.

The crash flung me across the cabin.

Blackness came to me and I gave myself up as lost.

I swam out of a deep, black pit, feeling that I was drowning, aware of water pouring on my face. The water was warm and as I returned to consciousness, I realised it was rain.

"Come on! Come on!" That voice I would know anywhere was shouting at me. "You're not hurt!"

I opened my eyes and saw the light of dawn coming through the treetops, then I dragged my body to a sitting position. I became aware that my head hurt and there was a nagging pain in my shoulder.

"Jack!!"

"Okay, okay! For God's sake, give me a minute!"

I wiped my face with my hand and blinked, then I saw her, standing over me. She looked like a drowned cat, her shirt and slacks plastered to her body, her hair like rat's tails: no longer the glamorous, fabulous Mrs. Victoria Essex.

I looked around. I was sitting in squelchy mud: broken trees lay around me. Rain beat down and the humid, stifling heat was as if I were packed in steaming cotton wool.

"Get up!"

I looked up at her.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes: and so are you! Where are we? What happened?"

Shakily I got to my feet and leaned against a tree for support "Olson had a heart attack." I turned and looked at the smash. I saw how lucky we had been. There were no big, solid trees. The plane had sheered through the jungle like a scythe. The wings with their jets had come off, but the fuselage looked intact. The tail unit was gone.

"Some smash," I said. "How did I get out?"

"I pulled you out."

I stared at her.

"You're some woman, aren't you?"

"I thought it might catch fire."

Then I remembered Harry.

"How about Erskine?"

"I don't know." Her voice told me she didn't care. "What are we going to do?"

I tried to think, but my mind was still groggy.

"I must find Harry."

"To hell with him! We've got to find shelter!"

Leaving her, I walked unsteadily over to the wreck. I peered into the flight cabin that had torn away from the fuselage.

I could see Bernie still sitting at the controls, his head on his chest. I hoisted myself into the cabin, opened a locker and took out a powerful electric torch. I played the beam on his dead face, then with a grimace I climbed down and into the fuselage.

Harry lay where I had left him. A pool of blood made a gruesome halo around his head. His jaw had dropped and his eyes were sightless.

I felt a chill of horror crawl up my spine. Had I killed him or had the crash killed him? He had been breathing when I had left him! I stood staring down at him.

"You killed him, didn't you?"

She had climbed up to join me.

"I don't know. If I did, it was because of you."

We stared at each other, then she pushed by me and tried to get into the Essex suite, but the door was jammed.

"Open it! I want to change out of these wet clothes!"

"Don't waste time. We've got to get out of here pronto. You'll be wet anyway."

She glared at me.

"I intend to stay here until I'm found!"

"We sold this kite to a Mexican revolutionary for three million dollars. If he gets his hands on you, he'll be happy with the exchange. He will ransom you for twice that sum."

Her violet eyes opened wide.

"So what are we going to do?"

"We can't be more than fifteen miles from the coast. Once there, we'll telephone your husband and he'll have us picked up. It's going to be a long, tough haul, but that's the way it's got to be. Wait here." I struggled up the inclining fuselage to the guest cabin where I had left my suitcase. I emptied the contents on the bed retaining only three packs of cigarettes, then I went into the kitchen. I packed some canned foods in the suitcase and included three bottles of tonic water and three cokes, a bottle opener and a can opener.

"Come on," I said to her and helped her down into the mud and the rain. I handed down the suitcase, then clambered into the flight cabin. I undipped the Thompson machine gun then searched in one of the lockers and found a pocket compass.

Flies were already settling around Bernie. I felt bad leaving him but we had to go.

As I joined her, she said. "I'm hating this rain."

"That makes two of us." I swung the gun by its strap over my shoulder, picked up the suitcase and started off into the jungle.

The next two hours were sheer hell: a lot worse for her than for me. At least I had had plenty of experience in the Viet jungles of this kind

of thing and knew what to expect. Although I had been a service mechanic I had had to go through a jungle course.

The rain was ceaseless, pounding down through the trees, giving us no respite. I kept checking the compass. I knew the coast was somewhere northeast, but there were times when the jungle was so thick we had to make a detour. Without the compass, we would have been hopelessly lost.

She kept up with me, walking just behind me. I paced myself, knowing we had a long way to go. Finally, we came on a clearing in the jungle. Trees had been felled. There were signs of fires, long dead that had burned unwanted wood. I stopped short at the edge of the clearing.

I looked to right and left and listened. All I could hear was the pattering rain. I turned and looked at her. Her face was drawn and blotched with mosquito bites. I could see the nipples of her breasts through the soaked shirt. I looked at her feet.

She had on casuals of white calf and they showed bloodstains.

She had walked until her feet were beginning to bleed and yet she hadn't uttered a word of complaint.

"Your feet!" I exclaimed.

"Don't pity me." She forced a grin. "If you have to pity anyone, pity yourself."

"How about some food and a drink?"

"Not yet. If I sit down. I won't be able to get up again."

We looked at each other and I saw she meant it.

"Okay. We'll go on." I slapped at a mosquito that had settled on my neck and we went on, crossing the clearing and into the jungle again.

I moved cautiously, worrying about the clearing. It told me there was a village nearby, and I knew we were too close to Orzoco's neck of the woods to take any risk.

It was lucky I hadn't forgotten my jungle training.

Suddenly, as we walked along the sodden muddy path. I heard a sound that immediately alerted me. I caught hold of Vicky's arm - I was now thinking of her as Vicky and not as the glamorous Mrs. Victoria Essex - and swung her off the path and into the undergrowth. She went with me without resisting although we dropped into a pool of muddy water and I gave her full marks for that. We crouched down and waited.

Three Yucatan Indians came down the path, all carrying broad bladed axes. They moved swiftly and I only caught a glimpse of them before they were gone.

"We're near a village" I whispered. "It's too close. We must move east and then head north again."

We left the path and struggled across swampy ground, through the

thick undergrowth and the going was bad, but she kept up. Then suddenly the rain ceased and the humid mist lifted. Like a glittering sword, drawn from its scabbard, the sun came out. The heat turned into a throat drying, sweat soaking hell.

Mosquitoes tormented us. My arms and face were swollen with bites. I stopped to look at her. What a mess she was in!

The only thing I could recognise in her swollen, insect bitten face were those dauntless violet eyes.

"What are you stopping for?" Her voice was a croak.

"Cut out the iron woman act," I said. "We're going to rest."

She stared at me, then her face crumpled and she dropped on her knees in the mud and putting her filthy hands to her face she began to sob.

I put the suitcase and the gun in a bush, then kneeling, I took her in my arms. She clung to me and I held her the way I would have held a child.

We remained like that for several minutes while the mosquitoes attacked us ceaselessly, then she stopped sobbing and pushed me away.

"I'm all right now." Her voice was steady. "Sorry for the dramatics. Let's eat."

"You've certainly got guts." I said as I opened the suitcase.

"Think so?" She looked down at the red bumps on her hands. "If I look anything like you, I must look like hell."

I grinned at her.

"At least you're human."

I opened a can of beans and a can of goulash. We ate the mixture with plastic spoons that were taped to the cans.

"Are you going to get me out of this mess Jack?" she asked abruptly.

"I'm going to try."

"Aren't you scared of going back?"

"I haven't thought of that. Right now I want to get us out."

She eyed me.

"You're throwing away three million dollars."

"A million: we agreed to split it three ways."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

I shrugged.

"It's an odd thing. At first I was thirsting for all that money, then I got thinking and realised I wouldn't know what to do with it. I remember you saying with all your money you got bored. That's something I wouldn't want."

"Would you still work for my husband if you got the chance?"

"I won't get the chance."

“Yes, you will. I’ve been thinking about you. I could tell Lane we crashed into the sea. You and I were the only survivors. We clung to some wreckage and you got me ashore. He would believe that, coming from me and he’d do a lot for you.”

I stared at her.

“Would you lie like that for me?”

She nodded

“Yes. You’re the first man who has ever treated me as a woman should be treated. You mean something to me.”

I tried to think clearly but my head ached. It seemed the solution: the way out. Instead of spending years in jail for air piracy. I would have a thirty thousand dollar a year job with Essex Enterprises, plus Vicky.

“I’ll get you out of here,” I said. “I . . .”

We both heard the sound of an approaching helicopter.

“Don’t move!” I looked up cautiously.

We were well screened by the treetops and I was pretty confident we couldn’t be spotted.

A few moments later I saw, just above the trees, the chopper pass over. It was painted a drab green and had Mexican roundels.

It went as quickly as it had come.

“They’re looking for the wreck,” I said and got stiffly to my feet. “I guess we’re about twelve miles from it by now: too close for safety. Once they find you’re not on board, they’ll start a hunt. Let’s go!”

I reached out my hand, grasped her wrist and hauled her to her feet. She fell against me with a cry of pain.

“God! My feet!” she gasped. “I don’t think I can walk.”

“I’ll carry you if I have to, but we’ve got to move.”

She pushed away from me, took four tottering steps forward, her face white.

“It’s all right; I’ll manage.”

“Good girl.”

“Don’t be so damn patronising!”

I snatched up the suitcase, slung the gun over my shoulder and started again. I walked slowly, but steadily, giving her a chance and I kept looking back. She limped along, her head down, the mosquitoes swarming around her, but she kept going.

We walked for over an hour, then the jungle ahead began to thin out.

“Rest,” I said. “Wait here. We could be nearing a road. Looks like we’re nearly out of the jungle.”

She dropped on her knees. I put the suitcase beside her.

“I’ll be right back.”

She was past speaking. She just knelt there, her head in her hands.

I moved forward rapidly. In three or four minutes I came out of the jungle. I had guessed right: before me was a wide dirt road. As I stood hesitating, I heard the sound of an approaching truck. I stepped back into the shelter of the undergrowth.

A rusty, battered truck, hauling oil drums, went roaming by, driven by a young, thin Mexican. It took the curve in the road and disappeared.

Maybe with luck, I thought, we could get a ride to the coast.

My compass told me the track was heading towards the sea: possibly to Progreso.

I went back fast to where I had left Vicky.

The suitcase marked the spot so I knew I hadn't made a mistake, but Vicky was gone.

As I stood there in the steamy heat with a cloud of mosquitoes buzzing around my head, my mind went back to Vietnam. I remembered the big, powerfully built Top-sergeant who took us on the jungle course.

"Every leaf, every tree branch, every bit of ground tells a story if you know what to look for," he had said. "So look for it. Look for signs that men have passed. If you look carefully enough, you'll find the signs."

I saw Vicky's knee marks in the mud. That was how I had left her: kneeling and half conscious. Then I saw a naked foot print, then another, then two more, big, splayed prints that came to the spot where Vicky had been kneeling, then reversed and went back into the jungle.

I unslung the Thompson and moved fast and silently along the path. In the thick mud the foot prints were easy to follow: two men: one of them carrying Vicky. I could tell that by the deeper impression his feet made in the mud. I moved fast. Ten minutes later, I could hear them ahead of me. They were jog trotting, smashing through the jungle and I increased my speed.

I didn't care if they heard me. With the gun I felt capable of dealing with them. I was running now and ahead of me I saw them: two Yucatan Indians. The one ahead was carrying Vicky, slung over his shoulder like a sack. The other ran behind him.

They heard me. The one behind spun around. He held a glittering axe in his hand. His lips came of his teeth in a snarl and he rushed at me.

I gave him a short burst with the Thompson and his naked chest turned into a bloody mess. The other Indian dropped Vicky, turned, his hand groping for a knife as I snaphotted him through the head.

I went to her, turned her, saw she was unconscious. I got her up across my shoulder, picked up the Thompson and began the long,

plodding, hellish tramp back to the dirt road.

As I staggered along, I heard the sound of the helicopter overhead. I paused under the shade of a tree until the chopper had gone, then I went on.

I was panting, my heart thumping by the time I reached the road. Gently I laid her down. Her eyes opened.

"It's okay," I said. "We'll get out of this."

She stared sightlessly up at me, then her eyes closed.

I sat beside her by the edge of the road, the gun by my hand and I listened and waited.

After more than half an hour, I heard a truck coming. I got up and stood by the roadside. The truck came into sight, driven by a fat Mexican. The truck came roaring along the dirt road, raising a cloud of red dust.

I stepped out onto the road and waved to the driver. He took one look at me and accelerated. If I hadn't jumped aside, he would have run me down.

The truck disappeared in dust and I cursed after it but I didn't blame the driver. Looking the way I did, he had every reason not to stop.

I went back into the jungle and found a long, broken tree branch. This I dragged across the road: blocking three quarters of it. The next truck that went by would have to stop.

I returned to where I had left Vicky. She was sitting up, looking dazed.

"Are you all right?" I asked, bending over her.

"What happened? I must have passed out."

I saw she didn't know she had been in the hands of two Indians. This was no time to tell her.

"I've blocked the road. The next truck will have to stop. We'll get a ride."

"His face will be something to see when he sees us." Vicky forced a giggle. "Help me up."

"You sit there and take it easy."

She looked up at me.

"You're quite a man" she said. "I wouldn't have survived without you."

I lifted my hand.

"There's a truck coming now." I pulled her to her feet.

"Can you stand?"

"Yes." She pushed me away and hobbled onto the grass verge.

The truck came into sight, travelling fast. The driver spotted the branch across the road and stood on his brakes. The truck came to a tyre-burning halt.

The driver, lean, middle aged with a tattered sombrero on the back of his head, dressed in dirty whites, climbed down from the cab.

As he began to drag the branch out of the way, I made a move forward, but Vicky stopped me.

"I'll handle him. Don't let him see the gun."

Before I could stop her, she limped onto the road. The Mexican gaped at her then she began to talk in fluent Spanish and I realised why she had elected to go instead of me.

He stood, listening, then nodded and finally grinned. She turned and beckoned to me. I hesitated for only a moment, then leaving the Thompson. I came out onto the road. The Mexican gaped at me nodded and looked at Vicky as if for assurance, then started to drag the tree branch out of the way.

"I told him we got lost in the jungle," Vicky said quickly.

"He's going to Sisal. He's willing to give us a ride."

I helped the Mexican to get rid of the branch, then we all climbed into the cab. She sat next to him and as he drove they talked in Spanish.

Around twenty minutes later, I heard the helicopter overhead and I regretted leaving the Thompson, but I knew I would have scared the wits out of the Mexican if he had seen the gun. The chopper flew away.

Vicky turned to me.

"He owns a coffee plantation," she said. "He's taking us there. He has a telephone."

I sat back and watched the dust road unwind before me.

The Mexican who told me by leaning forward and stabbing himself in his chest his name was Pedro, continued to talk to Vicky.

I marvelled at her guts to keep up a conversation with this man, knowing she was practically dead on her feet, but she seemed to draw on a hidden reserve and she kept Pedro enchanted.

Twenty more minutes later, the truck turned off the dirt road and bumped down a narrow lane to a plantation of coffee trees. Pedro pulled up outside a long, narrow building with a tin roof. I could see a number of Indians working on the plantation. A flat piece of ground before the building was covered with raw coffee beans. Two Indians were moving the beans around with rakes.

A fat, beaming Mexican woman came out of the building and into the sun.

"Maria," Pedro said and going to her exploded into Spanish.

I half carried, half helped Vicky from the cab of the truck.

As soon as her feet touched the ground, she gave a sharp cry and I picked her up.

The Mexican woman came rushing up, waving her hands and

yelling in Spanish. Pedro waved me to the house and I earned Vicky in. Following the Mexican, I carried her into a small, clean room and laid her on the bed Maria pushed me out and shut the door Pedro, beaming, led me to another room.

I made signs of washing myself.

He nodded, beckoned and I followed him into a primitive bathroom.

It was only after I had changed the bath water twice and was now lying in clean tepid water that I began to think of my immediate future.

If Vicky could make the story stick that we had come down in the sea, that I had rescued her, that Bernie and Harry and the plane had gone forever, then I would be in the clear. But could she make it stick?

There would be an enquiry: the news hounds would be after us: the pressure would be terrific. All the same, as I thought about it, I decided Vicky could swing it with Lane Essex taking of the pressure.

How about Orzoco? He couldn't squeal without showing his revolutionary hand. As I had registered the Blue Ribbon Air Taxi Service, I could assign the million and a half dollars back to him! Doing that must surely get me of his hook.

Who else did I have to worry about? Kendrick? If he ratted on me, I could rat on him. Wes Jackson? With Vicky behind me, Jackson should be an also ran.

The one weakness I could see was that Vicky and I were going to swear the plane crashed into the sea. We had to do that to make Harry's last broadcast stand up, but suppose the wreck was found in the jungle? I thought about this. I was fairly sure the Condor had come down within twenty miles of Orzoco's neck of the woods. If he had any sense, he would have the plane stripped out and destroy what was left. This was something I had to gamble on.

As I got out of the bath and began to dry myself I persuaded myself that my future didn't look too bad. Thirty thousand dollars a year, a steady job, plus Vicky. . . no, not bad.

But everything depended on her.

I should have known she could handle it. As soon as she got to the telephone, the power of Lane Essex clicked into action.

Within three hours a helicopter whisked us to the Merida airport. With only another half hour to wait Essex's plane landed and took us back to Paradise City. The plane was piloted by a beefy, smiling man who told me his name was Hennessey and he was Essex's new pilot. I remembered poor Olson saying pilots came a dime a dozen.

The news hounds and the T.V. cameras were kept at bay when we landed. Wes Jackson was at the airport, plus an ambulance, plus a doctor to whisk Mrs. Victoria Essex away.

That left me and Jackson.

“You must feel in need of a rest” he said, showing his tiny teeth in what he imagined was a smile, “but before you rest, there are a few questions.”

I shoved back my dirty sleeves and showed him the lumps made by insect bites.

“I need medical attention,” I said. “Questions must wait.”

An intern took charge of me. He wanted to put me on a stretcher, but I refused. I went with him to his car while Wes Jackson stood in the hot sunshine, staring after me like a shark who has snapped at a juicy leg and missed.

I was taken to the Essex Foundation Clinic. A pretty nurse administered to me. She spoke to me in a hushed voice. I could feel the power of Mrs. Essex hovering over her. If I had been the President of the U.S. of A. I couldn't have been treated with more deference.

But of course it couldn't last. Once my bites were treated— some of them had turned septic - once I had been fed and rested, Wes Jackson arrived. He didn't bring hot house grapes nor flowers, instead, he brought a lean hatchet-faced man who he introduced as Henry Lucas, the Aero expert for the insurance company covering the Condor.

I had had time to prepare my story and I was ready for them.

I was sitting in a lounging chair by the open window that overlooked Paradise City's yacht basin. Jackson and Lucas pulled up chairs and Jackson asked me how I was.

I said I was mending.

“Mr. Crane, we need as much information about the crash as you can give us,” Jackson went on. “What happened? Take your time: just tell us from the beginning.”

“I wish I knew.” I said, my face dead pan “It all happened so suddenly . . .”

Lucas said in a voice like a fall of gravel. “You're the flight engineer. Is that correct?”

I nodded.

“And you don't know what happened!”

“Sounds goofy, doesn't it? But that's a fact I was in the kitchen preparing a meal when we went into a nose dive. Up to then everything was working fine. I was thrown across the kitchen and my head slammed against the open door of the refrigerator and I blacked out.”

There was a long pause while both of them stared at me and I stared right back at them.

“You were preparing a meal?” Jackson leaned his bulk forward. “But, Mr. Crane, I understand you three had steak dinners before the flight.”

Be tricky, you sonofabitch, I thought, then said, “That's correct, but

Olson seemed keyed up. He didn't eat his steak." That could be proved. "Then he got hungry and asked me to fix him a sandwich. It was while I was in the kitchen, doing just that, that the crash came."

"You mean until the plane went into a dive, you had no idea there was trouble?" Lucas said. "Erskine radioed the port engines were on fire. Didn't you know?"

I gave him my stupid, puzzled expression.

"First I've heard of that. All I know was being flung across the kitchen and blacking out." Then as neither of them said anything, I went on, "The next thing I knew was the sea coming in. Somehow I found Mrs. Essex and got her out through the port emergency. The kite had broken up. There were bits and pieces floating around. I clung to something and kept Mrs. Essex afloat. I saw the kite sink." I tried not to look brave. "It was tricky, but we got ashore."

There was a deadly pause. Neither of them even pretended they believed me.

Jackson said as if his mouth was full of lemon juice, "That is what Mrs. Essex said happened."

I smiled at him!

"If Mrs. Essex said that's what happened and I say that's what happened, then that's what happened."

Again a long pause, then Lucas said. "I have a map here, Mr. Crane. Would you pinpoint where the crash occurred?"

"I'm sorry. You don't seem to have been listening to what I've been saying," I said "I told you when the crash occurred I was fixing a sandwich. Didn't Olson give Air Control a fix?"

"So you can't help locate the wreck?"

"I'm sorry."

"You can't suggest what went wrong? Erskine said the port engines were on fire and the extinguishers weren't working. Can you say why this should happen?"

I was sure they would ask this question and I was ready for it. I went into the technical mumbo-jumbo while Lucas, with a stone face, listened. I didn't convince him nor did I convince myself but Jackson listened and he was all I cared about.

"If I had been in the flight cabin when the engines caught fire, if I had been able to read the instruments, I could be a lot more helpful," I concluded, "but I was in the kitchen, fixing a sandwich."

Lucas gave me a map of the Gulf of Mexico.

"Couldn't you indicate about where the crash happened?"

I looked at the map, then shrugged.

"Maybe fifty miles of Progreso. I wouldn't know. Mrs. Essex and I were in the sea for about twelve hours and the current took us in. Could be sixty miles . . . your guess is as good as mine. I just don't

know.”

He folded the map and put it in his pocket “We have helicopters looking for signs of the wreck. So far there is a negative report”

“If they search long enough, they’ll find it then if you get to the Black Box, you’ll know how it happened”

They got to their feet, stared at me then Jackson said. “Mr. Crane. Mr. Essex wants to meet you. I will pick you up here tomorrow morning at ten.”

“Fine.”

Neither of them offered to shake hands. Lucas gave me a long, slow stare which I returned, but Jackson screwed his face into a smile. If Lane Essex wanted to meet me I was still, to him the boy with the golden halo.

Wes Jackson opened a polished mahogany door, motioned me forward, then said, “Mr. Crane, sir.”

I walked into a vast room with a picture window overlooking Paradise City. Before me was a vast desk, equipped with a battery of telephones and the usual gimmicks that go to make the top executive.

Behind the desk sat Lane Essex.

I had never seen a photo of him and I had been trying to imagine what he looked like. The small, balding man of around fifty-six years of age, with heavy horn glasses, a sparrow beak of a nose and thin, hard lips told me as nothing else could why Mrs. Victoria Essex shopped around for a bed companion.

“Come in Crane.” There was a snap in his voice. “Sit down.”

I took the chair opposite his desk. Then looking directly at him, I realised why he had made his billions. His steel grey eyes behind the glasses went through me like a welder’s torch.

“Mrs. Essex has told me about you. Apparently, you saved her life. Now it’s my turn to do a quid pro quo. I have had your qualifications investigated. You have a good record with Lockheed. Will you take charge of my airfield?”

“Yes sir.”

“I want another Condor built. Will you handle that?”

“Glad to sir.”

A telephone buzzed and he waved to Jackson who picked up the receiver, listened and began to talk softly.

“You could be making an important career for yourself here Crane,” Essex went on. “I want you to remember that here the word impossible doesn’t exist. You will have all the financial backing you may need, but never come to me and tell me what I want you to do can’t be done. If you do you’re out.”

“I understand, sir.”

Jackson hung up.

Essex looked at him.

"Crane takes charge of the airfield and the new Condor," he said "Pay him fifty." He looked at me. "Are you married?"

"No, sir" He turned back to Jackson.

"Get him one of our good bachelor apartments. Get him a good car and someone to look after his place." He looked at me.

"Have you a banking account?"

"Not here, sir."

He turned to Jackson.

"Open an account for him at the National Florida: credit the account right away with twenty thousand dollars: that's a bonus. Pay him monthly and pick up his tax tab." He stared at me. "Is that satisfactory?"

"Thank you very much, sir." I was pretty overwhelmed.

"Take a week's vacation. Those bites look serious. Report to Jackson Monday next week." He waved to me, dismissing me.

Jackson followed me out of the room and he closed the door as if it were made of spun sugar. In silence, he took me down a corridor and into another vast room but without a picture window.

"I'll arrange everything for you Crane," he said. "Just sit down."

"Thank you, Jackson," I said.

He stiffened and stared at me. I stared right back at him.

He hesitated. I could see he wanted to tell me he was Mr. Jackson to me, but my stare quelled him. Picking up the telephone he asked for Miss Byrnes.

"Miss Byrnes is our Public Relations Officer," he explained. "She will take care of you."

Miss Byrnes was a willowy, sophisticated woman of around thirty-six, blonde, with searching brown eyes and a determined chin. I was a little embarrassed when Jackson gave her instructions about the apartment, the car, the credit at the bank.

He detailed these items in a funereal voice and when he finally got through, he said, "Then Monday week at nine o'clock Crane."

"Right. Well, so long, Jackson. Thanks for your help." I saw Miss Byrnes's eyes pop open wide as I followed her out of the office. When out of Jackson's hearing, she turned and regarded me.

"What did you do? Save Essex from bankruptcy?"

"I saved Mrs. V.E.'s life."

She grimaced.

"That's something no one here is likely to do, so that makes you unique." She led me to her office.

Four hours later, I was installed in a three-room luxury apartment overlooking the sea with a red and beige Cadillac convertible in the garage, plus twenty thousand dollars in my banking account and six

days on my hands.

I had already bought myself a wardrobe without sparing expenses and apart from the wear and tear on my face I now looked presentable.

I got in the Caddy and drove to Kendrick's gallery.

Louis de Mamey hurried me into Kendrick's room. The fat queer was pacing up and down and practically biting his nails.

"For heaven's sake! What happened?" he exploded as I sat down.

I give him the whole story without holding anything back.

He listened, sweat on his face and every now and then, he lifted his absurd orange wig to wipe his baldhead with his handkerchief.

"That's it," I concluded. "A flop. Did you know Bernie had a weak heart?"

"Of course not! You don't imagine, cheri, I would have let him handle an operation like that had I known. What about the money?"

"I'll return it to Orzoco. I can fix that. The point is will he keep his mouth shut? If it comes out the kite crashed in the jungle and not in the sea we'll all be in trouble—and that includes you."

"I'll talk to him. If he gets his money back, he will accept the situation." Kendrick eyed me. "You owe me two thousand dollars, cheri."

"Expenses. Write them off against tax." I got to my feet.

"If you can smother Orzoco then we should all be in the clear. The insurance investigators are searching for the wreck so you'd better tell Orzoco to get rid of it pronto. How do I get the money to him?"

Kendrick stared at me.

"You really mean you're going to part with a million and a half dollars, cheri?"

"That's it. I don't want it. I've got a job with Essex. I'm a sucker for work. What do I do: write to the bank and tell them to pay the money to Orzoco?"

"I'll talk to him. He may not want it done that way. Give me a couple of days."

We left it like that.

I then drove to a florist and bought thirty-six long-stemmed roses. I wrote on the card: With my sincere wishes for your speedy recovery - Jack Crane. That was impersonal enough as I was sure Essex staff would quiz I told the girl to have the roses sent to Mrs. Victoria Essex right away.

Then feeling I had done a good day's work. I drove back to my new home and telephoned my old man, breaking the news that his one and only was safe and sound and was now settling down to a job of work.

Listening to my old man babbling with joy, hearing the catch in his voice that told me he was crying, I realised as nothing else could tell

me what a heel I was.

I came awake the following morning around 10.00. I was relaxed, my face and arms were returning to normal and I felt pretty good. Room service sent up eggs and grilled ham and I made a leisurely breakfast. This was the way to live, I told myself.

I looked out of the window at the sparkling sea and decided I would take a swim, then pick up a dolly bird, take her to lunch and then a drive in the Caddy. If she wasn't too stupid, I'd take her for a night on the town and bring her back here.

While I smoked my first cigarette of the day thinking of my future, the telephone bell rang.

"Jack? I wanted to thank you for the roses."

Hearing her voice did something extraordinary to me. It flashed into my mind that this woman - Mrs. Victoria Essex - could now prove lethal to me. Right now I was Lane Essex's special pet. I was in charge of his airfield. I was going to supervise the building of a new ten million dollar plane. I was being paid fifty thousand dollars a year for this and he was even paying my income tax. But if he found out I was screwing his wife, all this would explode in my face.

Lying there on the bed the telephone receiver against my ear, it came to me that this job was something I had unconsciously dreamed of: to be an executive with power, working for a billionaire.

A cold sick feeling took hold of me. I knew this woman had to be handled very, very carefully. Everyone connected with Essex Enterprises had warned me she was a blueprint for a bitch. Up to now, she and I had jelled because I had wanted her and she had wanted me, but so far as I was concerned, not now.

"Vicky! How are you?" I forced my voice to sound ardent.

"I'm recovering. My feet still hurt. Lane tells me he has taken care of you. Are you satisfied Jack? You have only to tell me: I can handle Lane."

A drop of cold sweat ran down the side of my nose and I flicked it away.

"Satisfied? He leant over backwards, and I have you to thank."

"Good." A pause, then she said. "He's just left for Moscow. I'm going to the cabin: join me at six," and she hung up.

Slowly, I replaced the receiver.

Suddenly my planned day of fun turned grey. I knew every time she and I met, I was putting my new career into jeopardy.

Should anyone see us and send word to Essex, I would have no career, and yet I knew Mrs. Victoria Essex was far too dangerous to

refuse.

The relaxed happy hours on the beach with a brainless dolly bird were now a pipe dream! I had to drive to the cabin, risk my future because Mrs. Victoria Essex had beckoned.

I spent the morning and most of the afternoon in my room, brooding. I drank too much. I didn't feel like eating. Then around 17.00, I went to the garage, got in the Caddy and drove to the cabin.

Sam came out into the sunshine. I nodded to him as he beamed, taking my overnight bag. He could betray me, I thought. A word from him to Essex would leave me out in the very dark cold.

Vicky was lying on the divan, sipping a dry martini.

"Jack!"

"How are you?"

She still had a few tiny blemishes from the insect bites on her skin, but they had been skillfully treated. She looked marvellous in a simple red cotton dress that reached to her ankles.

She looked up at me: her big violet eyes full of desire as she finished the martini and set down the glass.

"Lock the door, Jack. I want you."

As I turned the key, I again realised the trap I was in, but in spite of knowing this, I wanted her: no man alive wouldn't want her.

Our lovemaking was fierce. Twice she cried out wildly and I cringed, wondering if Sam was listening outside the door. When she was finally satisfied, she smiled up at me.

"You're quite a man Jack. Let's have a drink."

So we had martinis, then Sam brought in dinner of lobster soup, grilled salmon steaks, salad and coffee.

She talked: I listened.

"I must tell you about Lane." she said with a laugh. "He was really furious with me that I had taken a ride on the Condor. I've never seen him so mad. He sacked poor Thompson who let me on. If it wasn't for my feet, he would have beaten me."

I couldn't imagine any man beating this woman.

"Do you go along with that?"

She laughed.

"Men have their kinks. I don't mind so long as it keeps him happy. I smoke a reefer before he begins." She laughed again. "In a way, it's quite fun."

I suddenly felt sickened by this.

"Vicky . . . do you think I should stay the night?" I asked. "Don't you think it's dangerous?"

Her eyes turned hard as she stared at me.

"Don't you want to stay with me Jack?"

Did I hell! One slip and I would lose my future.

“Of course, but I’m thinking of you. It’s damn dangerous. Someone . . .”

“There’s no someone.” She stretched herself like a beautiful sleek cat. “Turn on the telly. Let’s watch the fights.”

So we spent the next two hours watching bums hanging onto each other and hitting the air around each other, then Sam came in to clear the dishes.

“Carry me to bed Jack,” she said. “My feet still hurt.”

Picking her up, taking her into her bedroom, laying her on the king size bed meant nothing to me. I just wanted to get away, but that, I knew, was something I wasn’t going to do.

“Undress me Jack.”

I could hear Sam washing the dishes. Reluctantly I undressed her while she lay still, smiling at me. When I had got her into a shortie nightdress, she said, “Take a shower Jack.” The violet eyes had turned hungry. “Hurry . . .”

Around 01.00, we finally fell asleep. She woke me as the dawn light came through the open window and we made love again. She seemed insatiable. I was still in a deep, exhausted sleep when she woke me again.

“Get up Jack. It’s after ten. Go into the spare bedroom. The doctor’s coming.”

I dragged myself, half asleep, into the spare bedroom. I dropped onto the bed, feeling as if I had been fed through a mincer. I slept.

What seemed minutes later, a gentle hand shook me awake.

“Lunch will be ready in an hour, Mr. Crane,” Sam said softly.

I staggered out of bed, took a cold shower, dressed and went into the living room. I was feeling like hell.

Vicky was sipping a dry martini.

“Hi Jack! Did you rest?”

I forced a grin.

“Yes, I find you marvellously exhausting.” I reached for the cocktail shaker. “What did the quack say?”

She grimaced.

“He wanted to shoot me full of antibiotics, but I said no.”

“You’re right.” I drank half the martini to give me courage, then said, “I have to go to the city this morning. I won’t be long, but I have to go.”

She put down her drink and eyed me.

“Why?”

Just looking at her, seeing those violet eyes turn glass hard seeing her face tighten into a stone mask told me as nothing else could that I was handling dynamite.

So I told her about Claude Kendrick and Orzoco. She listened,

staring at me.

"I must get Orzoco fixed." I concluded. "The only way is to pay back the money, then he can't beef. I have to see Kendrick and tie it up."

She drew in a long, slow breath.

"You've certainly involved yourself in a mess, haven't you?"

There was an edge to her voice.

"I can handle it. You don't have to worry."

That was absolutely the wrong thing to have said. She picked up her cocktail glass and threw it viciously across the room.

The glass exploded against the wall. She leaned forward, glaring at me.

"Worry? What the hell do you mean? If you involve me in your sordid hijack, you'll be sorry you're alive! Go and fix it! But don't you dare involve me!"

"Take it easy, Vicky." I was shocked at her viciousness.

"There's no need to get angry. I'll fix it."

"You'd better!"

Looking at her as she glared at me, her face like stone, her eyes blazing, she lost the glamour she ever had for me. For the first time I could understand why everyone had warned me that she was a blueprint of a bitch.

As I left the room, she screamed after me, "And come back! I want you here before five o'clock!"

Claude Kendrick received me in his room with a wry smile.

"It's all fixed, cheri: no problems. I have a document for you to sign. I have talked to Orzoco. He understands. Actually, he isn't displeased. He has salvaged a lot of expensive items from the aircraft which he gets for nothing."

"How about the wreck?"

Kendrick smiled.

"It doesn't exist anymore. It's all right. There's no problem. Just sign here. This assigns your company to Orzoco."

I signed with the name I had used to register the company: Jack Norton.

That seemed to be that.

"I understand Mr. Essex is going to build another Condor?" Kendrick said looking slyly at me. "Maybe we could do another deal?"

"Not a hope."

He lifted his orange wig, stared inside it and slapped it back on his head.

"Yes." He squinted up at me. "Mrs. Essex owns a number of

expensive baubles: particularly a diamond necklace. I would be in the market if you could arrange something.”

“Get stuffed, fatty.” I said and left him.

I got into the Caddy. The time by the dashboard clock was 13.30. I wasn’t expected back until 17.00. I decided to return to my apartment. I needed time to think.

I ordered the special for the day and it was served on a trolley. I ate it, then lit a cigarette and sat by the open window.

I told myself that once I began working for Essex, I would be out of Vicky’s clutches. I had to ride for the next four days, but once I reported for work, I would be safe. She would know this and have to accept it. I would be on the move all the time to satisfy Essex. To run the airfield and to supervise the building of the new Condor would give me no time to be in bed with Mrs. Victoria Essex.

I had four more nights of risk and I sweated at the thought.

Still. I tried to assure myself, her risk was as great as mine, and if she was satisfied she was safe, sleeping with me, surely I could feel safe too.

At this moment, my front door bell rang.

Without thinking it was anyone but the waiter to take away the trolley, I got up and opened the door.

There is a phrase people use: he jumped out of his skin.

An exaggeration, of course, no one can jump out of his skin, but he can do so mentally. He can be so shocked that blood leaves his face, he turns cold, and for a long moment, he becomes breathless. That was what happened to me when I saw Pam Osborn standing in the doorway.

There she was, blonde hair falling to her shoulders in a cascade of gold with her narrow, high cheek bones and her large green eyes. She had on a buttercup-coloured blouse and white stretch pants and her smile was the smile of a panther.

“Hi Jack!” she said. “Surprised?”

I retreated from her and she came into the room, closing the door.

Pam!

From the moment I had insisted that she shouldn’t fly with us and that she had to wait in Merida, she had gone completely out of my mind. Now here she was: the one fatal link between me and the hijack. I had believed, after talking to Kendrick, that I was clear of trouble. I also believed I could get clear of Vicky. She would soon get bored with me when I couldn’t run when she beckoned. Up to this moment, my future had looked settled, but not now . . . certainly not now.

I stood watching her as she chose a chair and sat down “I’m so happy Jack, that you are making such a success of your life,” she said

as she opened her handbag and took out a pack of cigarettes. "I've been talking to Dolly Byrnes: she's a special friend of mine. So you're now Essex's white-headed boy."

She stared at me: the hatred in those green eyes was chilling.

"Fifty thousand a year, tax free, this nice apartment, a Caddy and Mr. Big Shot at the airfield. How marvellous!"

I sat down. I was over the shock now and my mind was beginning to work.

"Fantastic, isn't it?" I was aware my voice was a little husky.

"That's the way the cookie crumbles, Pam. A terrible thing about Bernie. I had no idea he had a dicky heart: did you?"

"No." She lit her cigarette. "I went to his funeral: it was the least I could do. I hoped you would have been there too."

A chill crawled up my spine. So she could explode the story that we had crashed into the sea.

"I know you and Bernie. . ."

"Don't let's talk about Bernie," she cut in. "He's dead. Let's talk about me."

"Sure." Without any hope I went on, "Do you want your job back Pam? I can fix it."

"How nice of you Jack. Well, no . . . I will want something rather better than that. . . now."

So it was going to be blackmail

An immediate thought dropped into my mind. She had come here alone. Suppose I killed her? Would that stop this nightmare that was slowly building up around me? So okay, I killed her, but what was I going to do with her body?

I said. "What can I do to be helpful Pam?"

"I've been talking to Claude. He tells me you've returned all the money. Claude hasn't been helpful. He told me to talk to you." She crossed her slim legs. "Bernie was planning to marry me. We would have shared a million dollars. I would love to own a million dollars."

I nodded.

"Who wouldn't?"

She flicked ash on the carpet.

"I spent five days at the Continental Hotel at Merida." She regarded me, her green eyes stoney. "They could have been dull, lonely days, but as it happened, Juan picked me up."

"You were always a girl to find friends." I said.

"Come on Jack! You're not listening: Juan Aulestria. Remember? He works—used to work for Orzoco: remember now?"

My mind went back to the tall, thin man with thick longish hair and the smoothness of a snake and my heart skipped a beat.

"Juan was very kind to me," Pam went on. "He's with me now:

we're staying at the Hilton. He thought it would be more tactful for me to see you first, then he will talk to you." Her red lips parted in what could be called a smile. Juan has marvellous tact."

I had had enough of this cat and mouse act. I saw now that she had me in a comer. I was thankful I hadn't done anything stupid like killing her. Aulestria was far more dangerous than she could ever be.

"Let's skip the buildup," I said. "Let's talk business. What do you want?"

She took from her bag an envelope and tossed it into my lap.

"Take a look Jack."

The envelope contained four good photographs of the Condor wreck as it lay in the jungle. There was no mistaking the plane.

Its name and number were clear on the fuselage. The fourth picture made me stiffen. It was of Erskine's dead body, his head in a halo of blood.

"Just in case you miss the point of that photo" Pam said, "and I'm sure you don't: what was Harry doing out of the flight cabin at the time of the crash?"

I put the photos on the table.

"What else?" I asked and lit a cigarette. I was surprised to see my hands were steady.

"Isn't that enough?" She lifted her eyebrows mockingly.

"You could talk yourself into trouble. You were part of the hijack."

"You prove it. I was Bernie's girl. He told me to wait for him in Merida. I had no idea what you three were planning. Juan is going to tell the insurance people. If they are to be told."

"Okay. So what's the pay-off?"

"Five hundred thousand dollars: my half share of Bernie's money."

I couldn't believe it. Staring at her, I said, "Come on!"

"You heard Jack."

"And where do you imagine I could raise money like that?"

"From the Essex bitch: from where else?"

"You're crazy! She would no more give me a sum like that than fly to the moon."

Pam smiled her hateful smile of triumph.

"She will." She took another photograph from her bag. "I wouldn't have thought of it but Juan did. He arranged for a private eye to keep tabs on you the moment you returned here."

She flicked the photo into my lap. "Five hundred thousand is nothing to her. She'll pay to keep this photo away from Mr. Lane Essex."

I looked at the photograph. It showed me outside the cabin, standing by the new Caddy. I was handing my overnight bag to Sam.

She left behind her the smell of cheap scent and the five damning

photographs. Just before she left she said Aulestria would be contacting me.

“From now on Jack, he’ll be in charge of the negotiations. We won’t wait long. See the bitch and fix it.”

I wondered how Vicky would react. I was sunk. That I knew, but could I get her out of this mess? If Sam’s loyalty stood up under pressure, that photo of me arriving at the cabin wasn’t all that damaging. Vicky could tell Essex that she had lent me the cabin while I was on vacation and she had never been near it. After thinking, I realised this was a pipe dream. She must have told Essex she was going to the cabin and I was sure Sam wouldn’t stand up to an Essex cross examination.

So what was to be done?

I put the photographs back in the envelope and the envelope in my breast pocket. I lit a cigarette while I tried to find a way out. My first thought was to trap Pam and Aulestria somehow and kill them, but that too was a pipe dream. Aulestria was no fool. He would have taken precautions, lodging another set of photographs with an attorney with instructions: in the event of my death. Had Pam been handling this on her own, I was sure I could trap and kill her, but not Aulestria.

Again I thought of Vicky. I was wasting time, trying to find a way out. I had to discuss it with her and I cringed at the thought of her explosion. You involve me in this and you’ll be sorry you’re alive! Now, because she had had hot pants for me, she was involved. Because she couldn’t give me up, she had lied about the crash not only to Essex but also to the insurance people.

I looked at my watch. The time was 14.45.

Bracing myself, I left the apartment and drove back to the cabin. It was a drive I was to remember for the rest of my days.

The nearer I got to the cabin the more scared I became. I had already seen her in a rage and I flinched at the thought of how she would react once she knew how involved she was I also thought of the years I could spend behind bars. I couldn’t hope to get out under fifteen years. I would be middle aged by then and fit for nothing. Very late in the day I thought of my old man. This would kill him: I was sure of that.

I pulled up outside the cabin and Sam beaming, opened the door.

I went into the cabin, leaving him to put the Caddy out of sight, in one of the garages.

Vicky was lying on the settee, a copy of Vogue in her hand.

I stood in the doorway, looking at her. She put down the magazine and smiled at me.

“Hi Jack!” She laughed. “You’re nice and early.” She patted the

settee. "Come and kiss me."

I moved into the room and shut the door. I didn't approach her, but stood still, my shoulders against the door.

She lifted her eyebrows.

"Come on Jack! You mustn't take me seriously. I was mad. I get mad. Have you fixed it?"

"Start getting mad again." I said. I took the envelope from my pocket and tossed it onto her lap.

Her violet eyes turned hard. The sexy, hungry smile went away like a fist when it becomes a hand.

"What is this?"

"Take a look."

She stared at the envelope but didn't touch it.

"What is it?"

I came to the settee, picked up the envelope, took out the five photos and spread them out on her lap.

She looked at them, then slowly picked each one up and examined it carefully. She finally came to the one of me and Sam. She stared at it for a longer moment, then she put the photos together and offered them to me.

"How much?"

Apart from the fact her face was stone hard and had lost colour and her eyes were glittering, she was fantastically calm.

I could tell by the way her breasts moved under the sweat shirt that her breathing was even and that must mean her heart beat and her pulse were normal.

"How much?" she repeated.

This was a remarkable woman. She didn't have to have it spelt out and the explosion I had expected didn't materialise.

"Five hundred thousand . . . half a million."

She stared up at me. "You're an expensive lover."

I didn't say anything.

"Well, don't look as if the end of the world has come. Sit there." She pointed to a chair nearby. "Tell me about it."

I sat down.

She lay motionless, staring down at her hands as I told her about Pam and Aulestria.

"They won't stop at half a million of course," she said as if speaking to herself. "I pay them off and later they will come back: blackmailers always do." She looked up and regarded me. "You killed Erskine. Could you kill them?"

"Yes, but that won't solve this problem. Aulestria will have protected himself."

She nodded.

"The alternative is I go to my husband and tell him I've been foolish and hope he will be kind to me." Again it sounded as if she were talking to herself.

"You could do that," I said nervously.

She stared at me.

"You're a little man aren't you Jack? You're now wondering what is going to happen to you."

"I want to get you out of this mess."

"Do you?" She smiled. "Well, that's something I have - a half million. What do you suggest? Shall I pay these two? It would be no problem until they come back for more. What do you think?"

It was my turn to stare at her.

"You mean you can find five hundred thousand?" My voice was husky.

"Of course. That's no problem. The problem is should we do it?"

My mind raced.

If she could raise the money and if those two were satisfied with the pay-off, this could let me out. I might even be able to keep my new job with Essex Enterprises. Why shouldn't they be satisfied with half a million?

"It's a solution," I said, trying not to sound eager.

"So it is. Yes . . . as you so rightly say. it's a solution." She stubbed out her cigarette. "Well, so let's pay them." She paused to look me over. "You've met them: I haven't. Do you think we can trust them?"

I didn't know, but I wasn't going to say so. I was too anxious to get off the hook.

"For that money, they must play," I said. "For God's sake! A half a million!"

"They're at the Hilton, didn't you say? See if you can reach them Jack. Let's get it settled."

"You really mean it. Vicky? You're going to pay then?"

"Yes. I can't land dear Lane with a ten million dollar bill for his stupid plane, plus the knowledge that I've been behaving like a hooker, can I?" She shrugged. "After all what is half a million?"

Giving her no chance to change her mind, I called the Hilton and asked for Mr. Aulestria. There was a delay, then a man's voice said. "This is Aulestria."

"Crane. The deal's on," I said. "How do we fix it?"

"Here at eleven o'clock tomorrow." Aulestria said and hung up.

"At the Hilton at eleven o'clock." I told Vicky.

"It will take me two days to raise the money. Find out how it is to be paid." Her violet eyes were very impersonal. "Now run away. I must talk to my broker." She flicked her fingers at me. "Go home."

I had always had a presentiment that sooner or later there would

come a time when she would flick her fingers at me the way she flicked them at her other men slaves, but it didn't bother me. I was too thankful that there hadn't been a scene and that she was going to pay and my future wasn't in jeopardy to let a little thing like that cause me grief.

"I'll report back to you," I said as I moved to the door.

She was reaching for the telephone and didn't even look at me so I went out into the fading sunshine, got the Caddy from the garage and drove back to my apartment.

I knew there was every chance that Aulestria would squeeze her again, but I told myself that she was so goddamn rich, she could afford to be squeezed.

Yes . . . my future looked bright again.

The following morning. I arrived at the Hilton hotel a few minutes to eleven. As I was asking at the desk for Mr. Aulestria a man came up and lurched against me. He immediately apologised and I thought he was just another clumsy jerk, who banged into people and I forgot about him but later, I was to remember him.

Aulestria was waiting for me in a large room with a double bed and the usual Hilton fitments. Pam was sitting by the window. She didn't look around when Aulestria opened the door.

"Ah, Mr. Crane," he said, smiling his snake's smile. "Good to see you again." He closed the door. "So she is going to pay?"

"That's right."

"How wise of her. She has agreed to five hundred thousand?"

"Yes."

"Well. . . a little unexpected. I was rather expecting her to bargain. However, that is very satisfactory. I want the money in bearer bonds."

"That can be arranged. I want all the photos and all the negatives and an acknowledgement from you that the transaction terminates the deal."

"Of course you get the photos and the negatives, but no acknowledgement."

"That means you can put the squeeze on again."

"Mr. Crane! I assure you. We are perfectly satisfied with half a million, aren't we, Pam?"

Without looking around, she said, "If you are Juan, then I am."

"Be assured, Mr. Crane. When will the money be ready?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"Quite satisfactory, but not later. Bring the bonds here at ten o'clock. Don't be late. We have a plane to catch."

He conducted me to the door.

"What a fortunate man you are, Mr. Crane."

I stared at him.

"You think so?"

"Ask yourself" and he bowed me out of the room. I drove back to my apartment and called Vicky.

"Bonds?" There was a pause. "All right, I'll get them. Sam will deliver them to you tomorrow night," and she hung up.

I replaced the receiver and stared out of the open window.

There was something so out of character about this set-up that it began to bother me. I had expected a vicious explosion from this woman: no explosion had come. I had been willing to bet that she wouldn't have parted with half a million dollars and yet she had meekly submitted. The only thing in character had been those flicking fingers.

I tried to convince myself that she had so much to lose that half a million was an acceptable pay-off. Like her husband, she was stinking rich, such a sum was like a hundred dollars to me and yet somehow it didn't jell. It was so completely out of character. As I sat staring at the sunset, my future began to fray at the edges.

I had a meal, then wandered around the city, then went to bed. I couldn't sleep. Around 02.00 I couldn't stand my thoughts any longer. I took three sleeping pills and they gave me the oblivion I had to have.

I slept until midday. The rest of the day stretched endlessly for me. I wondered what I was going to do with myself. I thought of Vicky and suddenly wanted her physically, but I knew that was finished. The finger flicking act and those impersonal, cold violet eyes told me that as nothing else could.

I went down to the bar, had a double Scotch on the rocks and a chicken sandwich. It was all I could do to eat it. Then I drove down to the beach. The dolly birds were there, but they no longer interested me, I sat in the car, staring at the sea until dusk, my thoughts tormenting me. Then I returned to my apartment and watched the telly.

The following day was a carbon copy of the previous day.

I kept telling myself to relax. By tomorrow we would have Aulestria off our backs. The day after I would report to Wes Jackson and begin work. I was sure that once I began to work, all this would fall behind me. I tried to think what I would do once I was in charge of the airfield. I even made a few notes, but my heart wasn't in it.

Around 19.00, my front door bell rang. I let Sam in. He handed me a bulky envelope.

"How is she. Sam?" I asked, taking the envelope.

"She's okay. Mr. Crane. She'll always be okay." He shuffled his feet. "I guess I'll say goodbye. I'm moving on."

"What do you mean?"

He smiled sadly.

"Mrs. Essex doesn't need me anymore."

"You mean she's given you the gate?"

"That's it, Mr. Crane."

"What are you going to do?" I was shocked.

"I'll get by. I have my savings. I'm going home."

"You mean she's thrown you out. . . just like that?"

"It had to happen sometime. She's a difficult lady. If things go right with her it's fine: if they don't it's bad."

"I'm sorry. Sam. I feel it's my fault."

His nice, kindly face split into a rueful grin.

"If it hadn't been you it would be someone else." He wiped his hand on the seat of his trousers, then offered it. "Well, so long, Mr. Crane, it's been my pleasure knowing you."

We shook hands and he left.

Could this happen to me? I wondered. After this was over, after Aulestria had been paid off, was I too going to get the gate? I went over and sat in a chair.

Yes, I told myself. The writing was on the wall. You'll get the gate. She won't want you around as she doesn't want Sam around. You'll go: that's for sure.

I looked down at the bulky envelope I was holding in my hand. I ripped it open. It contained five bearer bonds, each worth \$100,000. I could get in the Caddy and take off. These bonds were cash. I could do that, but I wasn't going to.

I sat there thinking. My future had exploded. What was going to happen to me?

I suddenly felt in the need of comfort and there was only one person on earth who could give me that.

My old man answered the telephone: his voice sounded tired.

"Well, this is a surprise. How are you Jack?"

"I'm okay. I've been thinking. This job isn't working out. Is that garage still up for sale?"

"Could be. I don't know. I'll ask. Would you be interested Jack?"

"Maybe. Ask anyway." I had twenty thousand dollars of Essex's money in the bank. I wouldn't have to borrow from my old man. "How's the garden looking?"

"Wonderful. The roses have never been so good Jack. . . ." I could hear his excited breathing. His voice no longer sounded tired. "Are you coming home?"

"Maybe, Dad. I'll let you know in a little while. Yes . . . I could be coming home."

"All right, son. I'll wait to hear."

"I won't keep you waiting long. Bye now. Dad," and I hung up.

I didn't take any sleeping pills that night.

It occurred to me as I got into the Caddy the following morning that this would be the last time I would drive it. It was a fine car and I started the motor with regret. I drove to the Hilton and parked. A distant church clock chimed the hour.

Holding the envelope containing the bonds, I walked up the hotel steps and into the imposing lobby. In a few minutes, I told myself as I entered the elevator, the pressure would slacken.

I walked along the corridor and tapped on Aulestria's door.

It opened immediately and Aulestria stood aside to let me in.

Then he stepped into the corridor, looked to right and left, then came back into the room.

Pam was standing by the window. She had on a light dustcoat and two expensive-looking suitcases stood nearby.

"You have the bonds, Mr. Crane?" Aulestria asked.

"I have them." I took them from the envelope and showed them to him. He didn't attempt to take them from my hand, but peered at them, then nodded.

"Satisfactory." He took from his pocket an envelope. "Here are the photos and the negatives. Take them and I'll take the bonds."

We made the exchange. I checked the photos and the negatives.

"How many more copies have you kept back?" I asked.

"Mr. Crane . . . please. You can trust me entirely." He smiled. "There are no copies. I give you my word. Mrs. Essex can be quite happy about that."

"You'll be sorry if you try for another squeeze," I said, "but that's your funeral."

"There won't be another squeeze, Mr. Crane."

"I'm just telling you."

I turned and left the room. Walked down the corridor to the elevator and rode down to the lobby.

I was putting the envelope containing the photos in my breast pocket when a voice said gently, "I'll have those Crane."

I spun around, my heart jumping.

Wes Jackson was standing just behind me, his teeth showing in his shark's smile. He held out his fat hand.

"I'm representing Mrs. Essex. She has asked me to collect the photos from you."

"She'll get them, but from me."

"She anticipated that would be your reaction." He handed me a slip of paper. "Here is an authorisation." His little eyes dwelt on my face. "She doesn't want to see you again."

I took the slip of paper.

Jack Crane,

Hand the blackmail photographs to Mr. Jackson.

From this moment you are no longer employed by Essex Enterprises.

Lane Essex

I stared at the signature, then at Jackson.

“So she told him?”

“Naturally. No one has ever succeeded in blackmailing the Essex people: no one ever will. Give me the photographs.”

I gave them to him.

“Thank you. Now, Crane, let’s sit down for a few minutes. Let us both witness the end of this sordid little drama. It will interest you.”

He laid his fat hand on my arm and guided me to two lounging chairs that faced the elevators. He sat down and glanced at the photographs, then put them in his pocket.

I sat down.

From this moment you are no longer employed by Essex Enterprises.

I had anticipated this, but all the same it came as a shock.

“You will leave Paradise City immediately,” Jackson said. “You will be wise never to return. You can consider yourself fortunate. When discussing your case. Mr. Essex took into consideration that you did save Mrs. Essex’s life. This weighed in your favour. I am sure you will be wise enough to say nothing to anyone of what has happened. I can tell you we have withdrawn the insurance claim for the Condor and by doing this, we have neutralised the blackmail threat. The other photo means nothing.”

“They’re getting away with half a million dollars,” I said, “You call that smart?”

He smiled, looking more like a shark than ever.

“No one gets away with anything when dealing with Mr. Essex.” He stretched out his long, thick legs. “Ah! Do look. Crane. This will interest you.”

One of the elevator doors slid open. Pam, followed by Aulestria came out into the lobby. Behind them were two beefy looking men with cop written all over them.

Aulestria’s face was ashen. Pam looked as if she were about to collapse. The two men herded them across the lobby and down to a waiting car.

Another man, again with cop written all over him. came from another elevator, carrying the two suitcases I had seen in Aulestria’s room. He set them down and came over to Jackson.

He dropped the heavy envelope containing the bonds into Jackson’s lap.

“No problem,” he said and picking up the suitcases, he walked to the exit, got in the waiting car which drove rapidly away.

“Now you see, how our organisation works,” Jackson said smugly. “Those three men are ex-police officers. They will escort those two

petty blackmailers onto a plane to Merida: it is a chartered flight and they will have the plane entirely to themselves. Arriving at Merida they will be met by an extremely hostile reception. I need not mention that Mr. Orzoco has been alerted. Aulestria stupidly took funds belonging to Mr. Orzoco's party. They will know how to deal with him and with the woman. Aulestria is under the impression that the men escorting him belong to the City police. Every word you and he exchanged was taped and they have played the tape back to him. He imagines he is going to be prosecuted for blackmail. It won't be until he is put on board the plane that he will realise what is happening: then it will be too late." He gave me his shark's smile. "Little, stupid people Crane, like yourself. There is an old saying: the clay pot should never go down stream with the gold pot. The clay pot invariably gets broken." I could see he was enjoying himself. "You perhaps didn't realise that I had arranged for a bug to be planted on you when you first called on Aulestria. You might give it to me. It's in your right coat pocket."

Dazed, I groped in my pocket and came up with a black object no bigger than an Aspro pill. Then I remembered the man who had lurched against me.

As I gave Jackson the bug, I said, "So what happens to me?"

"Nothing." He heaved himself to his feet and regarded me contemptuously. "Nothing ever will," and he walked away, leaving me staring after him.

Perhaps he will be wrong. Ever is a long time.

I sat there thinking of my old man, the small time town and the garage that could still be for sale.

I suddenly felt a surge of confidence.

After all Henry Ford began small, didn't he?

THE END